Recognizing Aspects of Oneself in the Theory of Gerotranscendence
Abstract

The theory of gerotranscendence describes a development involving new understandings of the self, relationships to others, and fundamental existential questions. When learning about the theory, individuals frequently claim that they recognize aspects of themselves in it. This represents a bottom-up relationship between reality and theory, where the validity of a theory is spontaneously confirmed by individuals of flesh and blood – not by any formal theory testing procedure. But what does it really mean to recognize aspects of oneself in a scientific theory, and how should such recognition be understood?

The present paper reports on an in-depth study of a single individual case of such recognition or identification. The informant had first learned about the theory of gerotranscendence through a short presentation on a TV program. Because she felt she was familiar with aspects of the theory and saw them in herself, she emailed her insights to the second author. This self-report was followed by lengthy in-depth interviews with the informant conducted by the first author. The interviews revealed how this active, alert and mentally healthy subject had felt an immense relief and happiness when she learned about the theory, because the theory presented evidence that the development she was experiencing was both normal and healthy. A narrative analysis suggests that the informant’s individual life, including positively handled crises and turning points in a life course category labeled ‘Life as a hurdle race’, has paved the way for certain reevaluations and reconsiderations that may be prerequisites for the development of gerotranscendence. The informant’s earlier notes in diaries and small booklets rule out any suspicion that the life story she presented may have been tailored to fit the theory.
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Aim and scope

The theory of gerotranscendence was developed to address what Tornstam (1992) saw as a perpetual mismatch between prevailing theories in social gerontology and existing empirical data. Starting from his own studies and the empirical and theoretical work of others (e.g. Jung, 1930, 1953; Erikson, 1950, 1982, 1986; Chinen, 1985, 1986, 1989 a, 1989 b; Gutmann, 1976), Tornstam suggested that human aging, the very process of living into old age, includes a potential to mature into what he called gerotranscendence. Briefly, gerotranscendence refers to a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction - previously described as a contemplative dimension of aging (Tornstam, 1997 a).

In the contemporary elaborated version of the theory, gerotranscendence is regarded as the final stage of a possible natural progression toward maturation and wisdom. According to the empirically based theory (Tornstam, 2005), the individual moving toward gerotranscendence may experience a series of gerotranscendental changes or developments. These typically include a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental existential questions. The individual becomes, for example, less self-occupied and at the same time more selective in his/her choice of social and other activities. There is an increased feeling of affinity with past generations and a decreased interest in superfluous social interaction. The individual may also experience a decreased interest in material things and a greater need for solitary "meditation". Positive solitude becomes more important. There is also often a feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, and a redefinition of time, space, life and death.

Gerotranscendence does not imply any state of withdrawal or disengagement, as is sometimes erroneously believed. It is not the old disengagement theory in disguise. Rather, it is a theory describing a developmental pattern beyond the old dualism of activity vs. disengagement.

When the theory is presented to older audiences, it is quite common for individuals to spontaneously testify that they recognize aspects of themselves and their own development in the theory. They report having experienced many of the changes described by the theory. In this way, the validity of the theory would seem to be directly confirmed by old people themselves, rather than by any traditional scientific theory testing procedure. But what if this
reported identification with the theory is just reconstructions of reality or rationalizations that allow older people to align their lived lives with a pleasant, hopeful theory?

The present article describes an in-depth study of a single case of identification with the theory of gerotranscendence. Here, reading the informant’s earlier written material, such as small booklets and diaries, confirms that her experiences were in fact in line with the theory long before she had heard about it. In this case the subject, whom we will call Mary, first learned about the theory on a Swedish TV program in which Lars Tornstam provided a concise summary of his theory. Mary’s identification with the theory prompted her to write a letter to Dr. Tornstam, where she described how she had recognized aspects of herself in the theory. This letter aroused our curiosity: What does it mean to recognize aspects of oneself and one’s development in this specific developmental theory? Is it done with joy, relief or discomfort? Which parts of the theory seem to be familiar and which do not? And, last but not least, how can we interpret the emergence of such recognition? Could this person’s individual experiences earlier in life help to explain why she identified with the theory?

We had the above questions in mind when we asked Mary if the first author could interview her about her life and her identification with the theory. She agreed to participate.

**Data, methods and the interpretative approach**

Mary, the informant in the present study, is 75 years of age when interviewed in 2007. She lives alone in a medium-sized town in northern Sweden and is very happy about her situation. She has children and grandchildren with whom she has close contact. She has had several different professions during her working life, and she retired at 60. Mary has a disease that causes chronic pain, but she otherwise enjoys good physical health. Her mental health appears to be very good, and she shows no signs at all of dementia or any other psychological disturbance.

The first author interviewed Mary in her home on two consecutive days, and in addition to this had access to excerpts from Mary’s diaries and small booklets she had written. The booklets were not meant to be published or sold, but were written for her children, relatives and friends. Mary had selected parts of her booklets and diaries for the first author to read.

The two interviews lasted slightly more than four hours in total, and after both interviews, after the tape-recorder had been turned off, there was ample time to talk about many subjects, which gave the interviewer a detailed picture of the informant.
Because the theory of gerotranscendence is a developmental theory, it was considered appropriate to employ a narrative method that could capture the individual’s development during the life course, thereby contributing to our understanding of her identification with the theory. As pointed out by Öberg (1997), biographical interviews enable us to study the individual lifeline and its important turning points – as the individual experiences them.

During the first interview, Mary was allowed to speak freely and tell about her entire life. When she felt she had completed her narration, a biographical thematic interview was conducted in which complementary questions were posed. The goal was to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible of the informant’s whole life. During the second interview session, a question guide was used to focus on the theory of gerotranscendence.

After the interviews had been completed, the first author listened to the recorded material a number of times to hear what Mary stressed, to discern patterns in the narrative and to capture the overall feeling of the narrative. Transcription was carried out according to Riessman’s (1993) advice and guidelines, which briefly entail categorizing the content of the material such that the construction of categories is constantly related to the whole of the life narrative. This process resulted in the emergence of four clear categories or themes in Mary’s narrative, which gravitated toward questions concerning: 1) **Crises and turning points**, 2) **Social relations**, 3) **Reevaluations**, and 4) **Old age**. We will return to these categories later on.

**Interpretations**

As Riessman (1993) pointed out, interpretation is always at the center of the narrative method – interpretation of people’s narratives. Interpretation does not imply a search for the “truth,” but that one is open to testing several possible interpretations.

When making interpretations in the context of biographical research, we must particularly consider the fact that the informant’s life narrative is not objective, but instead his/her own story – a story that may not be in complete accordance with actual events. Öberg (1997) differentiated between two theoretical perspectives on interpreting life narratives. The **realistic perspective** assumes that the narrative reflects the narrator’s actual life, and is thereby a source of true knowledge. In the pure **constructivist perspective**, on the other hand, the focus is on the narrative as a genre. The lived life is constructed in the very act of narrating, and thus no truth exists outside the narrative itself. Öberg took a reasonable position in between the realistic and the constructivist perspective – what he called **retrospective reflection**. Using retrospective reflection, the life narrative is understood as a not completely transparent window on the actually lived life.

According to Öberg, we must be aware that the person producing the life narrative is the same as the protagonist in the narrative, but that the two are not perfectly identical. We make new interpretations
of the past in retrospect, and in a life narrative, the subject interprets his/her lived life on the basis of
the plot chosen for the narrative. This could imply, for instance, that someone attracted to the theory of
gerotranscendence might edit his/her life narrative so that its plot or main thread would harmonize
with the development described in the theory. We will keep this point in mind and return to it later on.

Interpretative tools

The mountain climber metaphor

When interpreting the interview data and the informant’s small booklets and diaries, the theory of
gerotranscendence has been used both literally and metaphorically. It is sometimes helpful to think
about a theory metaphorically, and here, the mountain climber metaphor has stimulated our reasoning
during the analysis.

We view life as a mountain that we climb over the course of our life. The mountain has level surfaces,
but also steep and brushy ones. In old age, when we have reached the top, we can look back at the
paths we have traversed. One person may see his problem-free childhood as a flowery meadow at the
bottom, and his anxious teen years as somewhat steeper and brushier. Another person may see a large
mound of stones at the foot of her mountain, symbolizing her troubled childhood. Perhaps we can see
level, beautiful sections, but with small stones and brush here and there, reflecting various minor
difficulties. Major difficulties or crises, e.g. a divorce, may be seen as icy steep slopes that can only be
climbed with great effort.

When we see our entire lived life from the top of the mountain, things are visible that were not visible
on the way up. We see the whole and the beauty of the mountain landscape that we have taken such
pains to pass through. We may also see how other people’s paths wind beside ours, maybe even paths
worn down by people from other generations. Perhaps a feeling of kinship can arise with those who
have lived and traveled before us.

A typology of Ways of Life as an interpretative tool

The theory of gerotranscendence is a developmental theory in which not only aging per se explains
gerotranscendental changes, but also the particular nature of the individual life. Öberg (1997)
presented a typology of ways of life, which may have the power to elucidate how our informant has
reached her state of gerotranscendence. According to Öberg, a way of life is defined as:

[...] the strategy an individual uses to take advantage of the resources created by social
background, education, tradition and the market (Öberg, 1997, p. 38; our translation).
Based on the oral life narratives provided by a number of elderly people, Öberg was able to identify six types of life narratives – ways of life – that also show how events from the entire life course are mirrored in old age:

**The Bitter Life:** A life full of tragedies and losses. A difficult childhood without basic security and lacking in any real contact with one’s parents. Poor adult relationships with one’s partner and other people. Health problems leading to difficulties in functioning in everyday life. Life did not turn out at all as one had thought. In old age, one has become depressed and isolated, lacking any positive belief in the future.

**Life as a Trapping Pit:** A life that begins with a troubled childhood. Later in life, one has either been married, but often without children, or had a dysfunctional marriage. During the life course, particularly the latter part of life, one has experienced various losses and sees oneself as a loser. One has experienced one pitfall after the other, and life did not turn out as one had imagined it would. One has no positive belief in the future.

**Life as a Hurdle Race:** Life begins with losses and problems in childhood. Other problems continue, e.g., marriage difficulties, too many children, illnesses, alcohol problems, poor relationships with other people. But one sees oneself as a fighter who can overcome any difficulty and come out a winner, which paves the way for a brighter old age. Relationships with children and friends are good, and one has a positive attitude toward life as an older person.

**The Devoted Silenced Life:** Life is dominated by taking care of others. One has remained unmarried and without children, and has instead devoted oneself to taking care of others, e.g., one’s own parents. One is nevertheless satisfied with one’s life in general and experiences a pleasant old age.

**Life as a Career:** This way of life is predominately experienced by men, often unmarried, who have been totally engrossed in their work or who have a family that supported their career. They define themselves through their work. They are satisfied with their life, experience a pleasant old age, and even have a positive attitude about the future.

**The Sweet Life:** Life begins with an idyllic childhood and continues with good health, a happy marriage and wonderful children. One is likely to have an academic degree. One has certainly had difficult times, but nothing has occurred that could not be resolved. One experiences a pleasant old age and has a positive attitude about the future.
Mary’s story

The description and analysis of Mary’s story is divided into two parts: a) *How Mary reacted on recognizing aspects of herself in the theory and what she specifically recognized,* and b) *A narrative analysis* intended to find explanations for this recognition in her individual life course. Thus, the first part focuses on recognition in relation to the theory of gerotranscendence, including the emotions associated with recognition and the features of the theory the informant both identifies with and does not identify with.

In the second narrative part of the analysis, we will build on Öberg’s types of life courses, the mountain climber metaphor described above, as well as the previously mentioned four specific thematic categories that emerged from the interview texts after repeated readings.

*Mary’s reaction to the TV program about gerotranscendence*

As mentioned above, Mary had watched a Swedish TV program in which Lars Tornstam presented a short description of his theory of gerotranscendence.

Before watching the program, Mary read a description of it in the newspaper and then searched the Internet to find out more. She was very surprised when she read about the theory. It touched on much of what she had written about aging in her diaries and small booklets. Mary reported that, after reading the information on the Internet and watching the TV program, she experienced a very strong feeling of liberation and relief. She had thought she was going “nuts,” but after learning about the theory she realized that her development could be completely normal.

> Then I wondered if I was strange in any way behaving the way I do. But then when I got in contact with Tornstam I realized that I wasn’t necessarily strange. [...] It was liberation, that’s the word! Relief and liberation.

Mary felt happy about the fact that research was being done in the area, and she also had a strong desire to spread information about the theory.

> Relief, liberation and joy because a man can do such a thing. That there are people who do research on something other than quantum particles. Quantum particles are interesting, I’ve read about them and it’s extremely interesting but I don’t understand a thing really. But yes, I feel a strong desire to spread information about the theory. I thought: why didn’t I know about this?

Prior to the interview, Mary, who described her great need to put her thoughts on paper, made a few notes after seeing the TV program and reading about the theory on the Internet. In these notes we can read the following:

> When I read his theory – looked in my diaries, and at almost everything I’ve written, just what his theory is about! And it’s precisely this that enriches my life. [...] I’m not senile! I’m not
getting senile! I was afraid I was, really, even though I’ve never felt so happy. Someone understands, finally!

After watching the TV program, Mary looked at the booklets and diaries she had written over the years and found that much of what was described in the program was in agreement with what she had previously written. For instance, the following passage is found in her diary from 2005:

I’ve become a child. Developed a childlike mind I never had before. And it’s intensive and very odd. Crazy jokes and impulsive ideas, play and laughter and wildness. Play has become a vital necessity, it has become me. It feels like I’ve finally realized what I am deep down, and I can’t believe I’ve ever been otherwise.

What Mary describes above is in accordance with what in the theory of gerotranscendence is called *Emancipated innocence*, which entails a revived ability to transcend needless social conventions and to be impulsive and “childlike,” this new spontaneity being added to the mature personality. The excerpt below also describes a similar development:

I used to make an effort to be “mature,” it was expected, and I expected it of myself, that I would be sensible and prudent in all situations. Now I accept it: in some areas I’m never more than three years old, pitiful, childish, attention-seeking and immature, while in other areas I’m a hundred years old, wise and penetrating and sensible.

The excerpt above was taken from a booklet one of Mary’s children asked her write about her experiences of aging. In the same booklet, Mary describes her current perception of time:

Time just disappears for a moment. Everything is united in a common point, the past, present and future. A Holy Trinity meets at its focus.

The above citation is in good agreement with the transcendence of time that is described in the theory. We will look at this more closely in the following systematic treatment of Mary’s experiences in relation to the dimensions of the theory of gerotranscendence, as they were described by Tornstam (2005, p. 188-189).

**The Cosmic Dimension of gerotranscendence**

*Time and childhood – time and space melt together and become one*

*Time and childhood* is one of the developmental changes belonging to the cosmic dimension of gerotranscendence. It implies changes in a person’s definitions of time, the return of childhood, and transcendence of the boundaries between past and present. Childhood comes to life – and is sometimes interpreted in a new reconciliatory way.

With regard to the theory, Mary recognizes clearly that her definition of time and space has changed. It started with her having difficulty remembering how long ago things had happened and when she had last seen a given person. She does not feel this is because she has become forgetful, but instead that
such things no longer seem important. Recently she has even experienced time and space melting together and becoming one.

Time stops. The past, present and future become one. It’s not memories, do you understand? It’s something strange, time and space don’t exist, and everything exists now. If there is a now...?

Mary has also thought a great deal about her childhood during the past few years, but this has recently subsided. She reports the following:

Memories have appeared, I don’t know if they can be products of my imagination too, but I know the kind of memories you always have with you. But then I’ve questioned what memory is, how much do we recreate our memories? But I’ve thought a lot, and that’s what’s caused me to reevaluate my childhood.

Mary states that she has recently begun to reevaluate her childhood, in approximately the same manner described in the theory of gerotranscendence. People who have come a long way in their gerotranscendental development often return to their childhood and reinterpret it from the perspective of their lived lives.

Mary reports that, about five or six years ago, she decided to write about her childhood. Memories emerged that she did not know she had and that she has perceived as a kind of grieving process.

Memories appeared that I didn’t think existed. And yes, it was a grieving process really. Even with the old memories in some way and I thought: how could my mother have been so goddamn nasty?

Mary’s childhood was marked by sorrow and isolation, and she describes her mother as an evil and cruel woman who did her a great deal of harm. Although she hated her, Mary did not want her mother to read about the pain she had caused and about how much it had affected Mary’s life. Her mother nevertheless managed to read what Mary had written, and she called Mary, crying and claiming that the text had ruined her life. A few years after this, her mother informed her that she had not had a single happy moment since reading Mary’s text.

Then I thought, good gracious! It made me go back and think of it in a different way and I asked myself: what part do I have in all this?

At this point, she realized that she had not taken responsibility for her relationship with her mother and that, in the future, she would have to be more straight with her mother. The result has been an improvement in their relationship. Mary talks about a conversation with her mother:

Mama, it says so in the booklet, but the fact is that I’ve recently started reevaluating things and then I’ve thought that maybe it was supposed to be like this. Actually, compared to many others I’ve met, I’m very happy in my old age. I feel my life is rich and meaningful. [...]

Mary now understands that her mother probably did the best she could given her circumstances, although this does not stop Mary from being angry with her mother:
But my childhood was difficult, no doubt about it. But she did the best she could, that’s for sure, I realize that now when I look back. She probably thought that’s the way things should be.

Mary used to wish that she had had a good childhood, but now she is thankful that it was difficult, because it has given her the ability to feel empathy toward other people experiencing grief.

Mama, my childhood may be the best thing that could’ve happened to me, because thanks to it I’m able to understand other people’s deep sorrow and unhappiness.

Mary says that, if she could choose now, she would choose the same childhood, though she is glad she does not have to experience it again.

The relationship to previous generations – it’s just like perennials

According to the theory, the connection to earlier generations is a developmental change in which attachment increases. A change from a link to a chain perspective on the generations ensues. What is important is no longer the individual link (life), but rather the chain (stream of life).

Several years prior, Mary had begun researching her genealogy.

It was probably a desire to find out: where do I come from? What were the people who came before me like?

She has spent many hours at the ethnology archives and has gathered a great deal of information. When she summarized what she had found, she experienced a feeling of affinity with earlier generations, and she was able to picture how we are born out of each other and how, through death, we leave space for something new. She said the following:

Like it works with perennials, it’s the same plant just new flowers every year. Just like in nature, but it’s a beautiful feeling.

Life and Death – moments of bliss

According to the theory’s description of life and death, the fear of death disappears and a new comprehension of life and death ensues.

Mary says she has never had any unusual fear of death, but that her fear of pain has been strongest. For this reason, she did not take great risks earlier in life. She was afraid dying would be painful – that one suffocates or that dying would hurt somehow. She asked herself questions like:

What happens when you die, is it painful? Do you get short of breath, do you suffocate and things like that. But now, it feels more like you give up. I think I’ve had a moderate fear of death. But I think it’s mostly been a fear of pain.
During recent years, she has had what she calls “death experiences.” These have not frightened her, but instead she has experienced them as moments of bliss. Realizing now that death can arrive at any time, she says, she can take advantage of life differently than if she were to avoid thinking about it:

In one way, I think life is terribly exciting and great fun, but in another way I could give it up. That’s pretty paradoxical.

Here, Mary unites two ideas that are hardly compatible for someone who has not made considerable progress in his/her gerotranscendental development: She loves life, but does not care if she dies.

*Life’s mysteries – letting go of the search*

The cosmic dimension of the theory of gerotranscendence describes a change toward beginning to accept the mysterious aspects of life.

Mary reports that she was once a very analytical person; everything was to be placed into an intellectual, comprehensible and rational pattern. She realizes now that her analyses spoiled many things in her life. But a major change has occurred during recent years. According to Mary, she now just wants to live and not to use her time trying to find explanations:

I think like this: why waste your life and time trying to find explanations when you can simply live?! I can choose to sit around and think about how matters stand with my strange experiences. It might depend on this or that, but is it possible to find an explanation? I’ve come to one conclusion: the explanation I arrive at will certainly be wrong anyway.

I say, life is marvelous, that explanation is enough for me these days. I can’t solve the riddle, I just see life’s wonderful beauty.

But Mary still believes it is important that she was a questioning and truth-seeking person when she was younger. All that searching and pondering earlier in life was necessary for her to realize that one never finds ‘the truth.’

I think maybe certain experiences are necessary, also pondering, thinking, analyzing, and searching, but then there comes a time when you have to let go of the search, because then you’ve experienced that you can’t find the truth anyway. But everything I’ve read and thought is gathered together in one big experience.

*Causes for rejoicing in life – even going to the grocery store is exciting*

The theory describes how causes for *rejoicing* change from grand events to subtle experiences, and how the joy of experiencing the macro cosmos in the micro cosmos materializes, often related to experiences in nature.

A great change has occurred in what Mary appreciates in life and in what makes her happy. She tells that when she was younger, more was required to make her happy, for instance she traveled a great
deal. At present, Mary has no need to visit the neighboring town, but can experience happiness in relation to small events. These could be everyday encounters in town with people she knows or does not know. Music and nature are two of her greatest joys. Mary spends at least two hours a day listening to music, and she has an allotment she loves to be in:

Birds, plants, trees, they don’t just please me – they make me happy. Music makes me happy.

Mary also tells about a woman friend who travels all over the world, but who still says that she does not feel life has anything exciting to offer. Mary’s reaction is as follows:

Are you crazy? I think going to the grocery store is exciting.

Just as described in the theory of gerotranscendence, Mary’s causes for joy in life have changed, from rather extravagant traveling to subtle everyday events.

**The Dimension of the Self**

**Self-confrontation – an eye opener**

The concept of *self-confrontation* in the theory of gerotranscendence refers to the discovery of hidden aspects of the self – both good and bad.

During recent years, Mary has also opened her eyes to both the negative and positive aspects of herself, aspects she had not seen previously. Through these insights, Mary has also come to accept herself to a greater degree. A number of years ago, she asked her children to tell her when she behaved in a way they did not like. She is very thankful to her children for having been so open with her.

No one knows you as well as your children do, because they give you insight into yourself. I shook it off at first. They don’t say that much any more, they’ve already said almost everything. It’s been incredibly helpful for me to see when I behave in one way or another. It’s opened my eyes to certain behaviors I didn’t even know I had.

Mary has also developed a better self-confidence:

I’ve had poor self-confidence, but now when I’ve grown older, it’s like a fiasco doesn’t bother me as much anymore. Sometimes I think I can’t do this. But then I get started and I realize that I actually can accomplish things. [...] Unthinkable ten years ago!

**Reduced self-centeredness – one little speck in the universe**

When asked if she has changed with regard to feeling more or less important now compared with earlier in life, she replied:
Less important because I’m just a little speck in the universe. [...] A little grain, so in that sense I’m not important in the slightest. But at the same time I notice that I do important things. So it’s both really.

Mary’s description is in good accordance with the theory, according to which a removal of the self from the center of the universe may accompany gerotranscendental development.

**Body transcendence – the body is less important**

The theory tells about a process in which taking good care of the body continues, while obsession with it subsides.

Mary, however, reports that she has not been good about taking care of her body her whole life and that she still feels she neglects it.

Yes, there I fall short. I should take better care, I know. I should be wiser, get more exercise and eat healthier food and so on. [...] I know that I’d be able do more if my body was in better shape, but I still neglect it, which isn’t good.

She is not completely satisfied with her appearance and says she should think more about what she eats and get more exercise, but at the same time she feels her body has become less important to her. She simply no longer cares as much about how she looks.

When she is asked what she thinks when she sees her reflection in the mirror, she burst out:

Ugh! It’s not beautiful! (laughter) I’m pretty happy about my face, but I can see that my body is wrinkled. You can’t say it’s beautiful, you can’t, but it’s still my body. [...] It’s like it’s not so important.

Here, Mary’s description differs from the theory, in that she still has a bad conscience about not taking good enough care of her body. At the same time, she does point out that her body has become less important, compared to its importance earlier in life.

**Self-transcendence – more egocentric and less egoistic**

According to the theory, *self-transcendence* refers to a developmental change from egoism to altruism. Mary reports that, during recent years, she has become in a sense both more egocentric and less egoistic. By more egocentric she means that when she sees friends and family, she talks a great deal about her life and what is happening around her. Mary believes this is because she has no partner to share daily experiences with. But also during recent years, she feels she primarily does things to please others.

That’s why what gives me most joy is to feel that what I do will be of benefit to others and to see other people’s happiness. [...] And then sometimes I think, what is egoism really, isn’t it
egoistic to rejoice in other people’s joy? Yes, but I don’t care, I don’t care if egoism is behind it or not because here on earth we don’t know if it’s egoism being non-egoistic is maybe just as egoistic.

Here we see how Mary’s thoughts about her own change from egoism to altruism constitute a special kind of self-confrontation, in which one’s own altruism is questioned.

**Ego-integrity – life as a bag of candy**

Borrowing the term ego-integrity from Erikson (1982), the development of gerotranscendence includes an increased feeling of unity in life, where the individual realizes that the pieces of life’s jigsaw puzzle form a whole – a notion also close to what Antonovsky (1987) referred to as a sense of coherence (SOC) about one’s life and the challenges one has faced.

Mary says that, when she thinks about her life, she is deeply thankful because she has been given so much. She states:

> I’ve been given wonderful children and grandchildren, I have enough food to eat and the ability to write. No, I look at life with thankfulness. It’s like what I wrote somewhere that life is like a bag of assorted candy, sometimes you get a bitter piece, but no it could be all over now, but I still want to live.

According to Mary, now, when she looks at her life as a whole, it feels like the puzzle pieces have come together and she experiences coherence. According to the theory, however, coherence may be a fragile state, requiring tranquility and solitude. The increasing need for tranquility and solitude will be addressed below.

**The dimension of Social and Personal Relationships**

*Changed meaning and importance of relations – the importance of solitude and silence*

According to the theory, the gerotranscendental individual becomes more selective and less interested in superficial relationships, exhibiting an increasing need for periods of solitude.

Mary reports that she has the same number of friends, but that her way of socializing with them has changed. A few years prior, she began declining dinner invitations that did not come from a very close woman friend or involve only her closest friends. Mary says the following:

> You know they have gatherings where everyone sits at the table and bla bla bla, I don’t want that.

Mary’s interest in superficial relationships has decreased. On the other hand, she feels her relationships with her very closest friends have become deeper: They now talk about more important things than they used to. Mary greatly values her friends and thinks that friendship is very important.
She says that her need for solitude has increased markedly during recent years and that solitude and silence are among the most important things in her life:

Before I thought I needed solitude so I could digest things. Think about why life turned out like it did and things like that and how I wanted life to be now. But now, solitude is just solitude and silence, it’s not filled up with so many thoughts or pondering about what it was like when I was a child or what I’ll do tomorrow. Not for reflecting on life so much any more, but just for enjoying and being in silence. I mean, you always have thoughts, but there’s a difference.

While the need for positive solitude is great, Mary points out that encounters with people are also important and that one needs to find a balance between solitude and being with people. She says, “Without people life is empty, without solitude it’s incomplete and superficial.”

Though she reports having many friends, she also indicates that she would like to have friends who are her own age, because at present all her friends are younger.

Role-playing in life – being aware of it and letting it go

The theory describes a process in which an understanding of the difference between self and one’s role takes place, and an urge to abandon roles sometimes occurs.

Mary reports having put a great deal of thought into the roles we play in our social lives and believes that this role-playing is the tragedy of humankind. She says that, earlier in life, she was very formal, but has realized later in life that this does not suit her.

It’s so focused on role-play, you have to be formal. I’ve been formal most of my life and it doesn’t suit me at all. If you could have seen me ten years ago you wouldn’t have believed it was the same person, extremely formal.

During recent years, Mary has felt that she no longer wants to play any role, but instead try to be exactly who she is.

I’ve come to the conclusion that I don’t care what people think about me. If they don’t like who I am, then we simply don’t match. If they do like me, then they like me for who I am and not for the role I’m playing.

Mature Emancipated Innocence – play and mischief in everyday life

Emancipated innocence refers to a revived capacity to transcend needless social conventions and be impulsive and “childish”, where this spontaneity is added to the mature personality.

According to Mary, she has developed her more childish side during recent years. As mentioned earlier, this is something Mary had written about in her diaries and booklets. During the interview, Mary talks about how she perceives herself as a mixture of a small child and an old woman, and how
she no longer cares about what other people think of her. She describes her wish that others would follow suit and become more “childish.”

Imagine what life would be like if everyone could play and be mischievous and have some fun, then it would be fun to go into town!

Modern asceticism – lack of money is no limitation

According to the theory, modern asceticism refers to an understanding of the petrifying gravity of excessive wealth. With this understanding, the freedom of a new perspective develops – having enough for a modern definition of the necessities of life, but no more.

Mary says that her need to buy clothes and other objects has diminished a great deal during recent years. Earlier, she could buy expensive clothes and other items, but now she would rather give away things she feels she no longer needs. Although her personal economy is not exceptionally good, she is not worried because she knows she will always have enough money for her food and rent. She thinks that is enough now and she explains it by saying:

My financial situation is worse than before, it’s pretty bad actually. I’ve got some savings and a pension, but it gets worse and worse with every year that passes, because my I’m using up my savings. But I think: I’ve got my pension, I’ve got enough to buy food and I will be able to live here in the future.

Everyday wisdom – bad choices can lead to something good

According to the theory, with gerotranscendence comes a reluctance to superficially separate right from wrong, and thus refraining from passing judgments and giving advice can be discerned. Transcendence of the right-wrong duality, accompanied by increased broadmindedness and tolerance, ensues.

Mary reports that nowadays she is not as willing to give advice because she knows how unpredictable life can be and that advice that sounds wise may lead someone astray. This is in accordance with the theory of gerotranscendence, which states that the certainty of youth about what is right and wrong diminishes and that insights into the fluidness of boundaries develops. Mary states that:

When you look back at your life, you find that often, often, it’s the incorrect choices that have led to a happier and more meaningful life.

Mary also asks herself why, at this point, she would know the truth, when she has changed her opinions on different matters several times during her life and will probably change them again very soon.
**Summing up**

What is it like, then, to see aspects of oneself in this theory of gerotranscendence? Mary expressed only positive feelings. Recall that she had previously been afraid she was going “nuts,” but now feels liberated after recognizing that her development mirrors that described in the theory of gerotranscendence. Based on her own feeling of liberation after hearing about the theory, Mary also expresses a strong desire to spread information about it.

According to Mary, she truly recognizes many aspects of herself in the theory of gerotranscendence, and we see that her own experience of aging corresponds with almost all developments included in the theory. One development she does not really see, however, is that of body transcendence. Mary is not satisfied with her appearance and she is concerned because she does not take sufficient care of her body, which she reports she has never done. Here, her development is partly different from that described in the theory, which states that with increased gerotranscendence, one usually experiences a more relaxed attitude toward the body. Still, Mary does describe this in some respects. She is no longer as fixated on her body as she was earlier in life.

Because Mary’s recognition of and identification with the theory of gerotranscendence are so apparent, we must ask whether they could be understood from a constructionist perspective, thus as a rationalization in which the plot of her life narrative has been edited so as to correspond with the theory. We will return to this possible interpretation in the final discussion.

**Narrative analysis**

Using narrative analysis, we will now elucidate what may have caused Mary to identify with the theory of gerotranscendence. With reference to Öberg’s types of life courses and the mountain climber metaphor, Mary’s life narrative will be depicted based on the four themes mentioned earlier: *Crises and turning points*, *Social relations*, *Reevaluations*, and *Old age*.

**Crises and turning points**

Tornstam (1997 b) found that crises in life can serve as catalysts to development toward gerotranscendence. Mary’s life narrative also stresses the importance of the crises she has experienced during her life. According to Mary, she has experienced three major crises. The first was an entire crisis period during her childhood, when her mother sometimes sent her away because she could not deal with having two children in the home. The second crisis occurred when a man left Mary, and the
third major crisis was when she herself ended a relationship with a man she deeply loved, but could not be involved with.

According to Arvidsson (1998), all events in a narrative are not important. The important events are the turning points, which are usually marked by evaluative comments such as “and then things were different.” The first crisis Mary mentions, her experiences in childhood, is somewhat different from the patterns Arvidsson described. This is not a delimited crisis event, but an entire period in life that has been difficult and trying, but that Mary later reinterprets, realizing that it did impart something good. We will return to this in the section on reinterpretations and reevaluations.

The other, more typical, crisis occurred when a man left Mary. She describes how she felt such enormous pain that she physically doubled up, but that with time this event gave rise to something positive:

But what it brought about was a flash of creativity, so I came out of that crisis... I don’t know what was released in me and with it creativity. Writing, coming up with tons of ideas and the like and he released something and so I think: What incredible luck that I had that crisis!

The crisis released something positive, although it simultaneously generated a fear of failure. Now, using a retrospective perspective, Mary has at least partly come to terms with this fear. When she has seen in retrospect that the mistakes she has made have actually led to something positive in many cases, her fear of failure has subsided. When one stands at the top of life’s mountain looking down at the paths one has taken on the way up, one sees that faulty steps have actually led to the discovery of new and better paths. In this way, the fear of taking the wrong step again is replaced with the comforting knowledge that faulty steps may lead to positive outcomes.

Another crisis and turning point in Mary’s life, which she does not consider major, was when she contracted a disease several years ago that causes severe physical pain. When she contracted the disease, she was very depressed about the pain. But one day, while out taking her daily walk, Mary suddenly saw how beautiful everything around her was. She says she saw the trees against the sky, the shining sun and beautiful flowers and she thought: “I’m alive.” When she got home, she asked herself a question:

Do I want to lie here crying and complaining about my pain or do I want to enjoy the time I’ve got left? I chose the second alternative, and I’ve kept to it through the years. [...] Who knows, maybe I wouldn’t have started all my projects if I hadn’t been ill. We don’t know anything about why things are the way they are; the only thing I know is that I’m having fun right now!

Mary’s way of overcoming crises and gleaning something positive from them is in good accordance with Öberg’s life course type Life as a hurdle race, where crises and difficulties are mastered and where one retakes control, becoming a hero in one’s own life narrative.
Social relations

Love is a central concept in Mary’s narrative. She talks about love for the men she has met, love for children, grandchildren and friends. She says she feels a positive dependence on her children and grandchildren, and points out that they are very close. They see each other often, sometimes to write small booklets together. In doing this, Mary lets her grandchildren’s and her own imagination flow and come together. Mary also tells about the fine relationships she has developed through her volunteer work with developmentally disabled people and how this has been both thought provoking and enriching:

I told a friend that I felt so happy and then she said: “But my God, how can you be happy? Those poor people, it’s a tragedy.” Then I thought: Is it a tragedy? Let’s just say that you have several lives, which I don’t know if I believe in, then I wouldn’t be so afraid of being born with a mental disability.

While Mary talks about her close contact with other people, she also says physical encounters are not as important now as they once were, because now the people are inside her. When she misses a person she saw earlier in life, she does not need to actually see that person in the flesh:

I’ve thought of two different words. Memories, then you look back and think. But experiences are like a piece of music so you just take out a tone that’s inside you. So, if I want to see B again, he doesn’t need to come here and knock on my door, I just take out that little tone from my own piece of music, I am the piece of music. So I see all people as walking pieces of music.

That Mary has such strong ties to the developmentally disabled people she sees may have something to do with the fact that she has come so far in her gerotranscendent development. It may also be the case that experiencing these people and their special outlook on the world has opened Mary’s mind to different views and prepared the ground for her own reevaluations in life.

Mary also reports that she previously missed having a man in her life, but that has changed and now she feels it is enough that she experienced such companionship earlier. She does not know, however, if this feeling will last, even though she has no need to meet a new man at this point in her life.

Reinterpretations and Reevaluations

Mary’s own spontaneous life narrative starts in her childhood. She describes how she grew up in an environment with trees, a hammock and a lovely view of a lake. The beginning of the story seemed to promise a description of a most ideal childhood, but that did not turn out to be the case. Mary instead describes how mean her mother was, how her father hit her and how she was sent away from her home for a period when she was a toddler because her mother felt she did not have time for two children.
Mary reports that she has always hated her mother and that she does so to this day. But she also says that her views on her childhood and her relationship with her mother have changed during recent years. Mary has realized that it may be because of her horrible childhood that she has been given the gift of feeling strong empathy with other people. If she were given the chance today to choose another childhood, she would not change things, which she also told her mother:

Mama, my childhood may be the best thing that could’ve happened to me, because thanks to it I’m able to understand other people’s deep sorrow and unhappiness. [...] If I could choose now and got to have a happy and harmonious childhood, I’d still choose the same one.

Earlier in life, Mary wished she had had a different and happier childhood, but this has changed, and her reinterpretation and reevaluation also include an element of reconciliation with her horrible childhood mother, though Mary reports still hating her mother.

This interesting reevaluation of childhood may be more understandable if we consider the mountain climber metaphor. Only when Mary has climbed high up on the mountain and can look back on her terrible childhood is she able to see that it has entailed something good. She sees how her childhood has helped her find paths that let her help other people, who perhaps have been of help to her during difficult times.

According to the theory, gerotranscendental development requires openness to reinterpretations and reevaluations in life. In her life narrative, Mary shows that she has dared to let go of previous valuations and has been open to seeing earlier events and valuations in a new light and from the perspective of the entire lived life – as seen from the top of life’s mountain.

According to Öberg (1997), we are always making new interpretations of the past and in our life narratives describing the lived life in accordance with the plot we have chosen for the narrative. Because Mary was somewhat familiar with the theory of gerotranscendence prior to the interview, it is possible that she adjusted her life narrative plot so that its main lines of thought would harmonize with the theory. Thus, at least theoretically, there is the possibility that Mary’s reported reinterpretation of the meaning of childhood is a rationalization made to bring her life narrative in line with the theory. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that the TV program Mary had watched mentioned a similar case of an older woman who had reconciled with her long-dead mother through the reinterpretations and reevaluations she made, during old age, concerning what really happened during her childhood. We will return to this problem.

Old age

In their empirical study, Öberg and Tornstam (1999) found that we often perceive ourselves to be younger than we actually are. From a gerontological perspective, this could be understood as a defense reaction against the general negative picture of old age. In Öberg’s (1997) study of types of life
courses, it was also the case that none of the informants whose life narrative belonged to the category *life as a hurdle race* considered themselves old, or felt they had entered old age. All of them described themselves as younger than their chronological age.

Mary, however, does not follow this pattern. She repeatedly reports seeing herself as old, liking being old as well as liking the word “old”:

I like the word ‘old’. [...] Can’t we change the word ‘old’? Can’t we start upgrading it? Just think about how positive it is to be old, knowledge, experiences, you can put things together. Because if you say, “well, I’m old”, then people say, “you’re not old, you’re young.” – No, I’m old.

Although Mary may not have reached the very top of the mountain chronologically speaking, she feels that she has, and she likes it there.

Given that Mary feels good, likes her life as an elderly person, and enjoys the overall view she has from the top of her mountain, we can imagine that she may have a tendency to embellish stories from her past, that is, to create a plot in her narrative that is in harmony with her present, positive situation. Öberg (1997) discussed this possibility, but also established that in *life as a hurdle race*, like in Mary’s narrative, there are detailed descriptions of previous events that have been perceived as difficult and miserable, but that have been overcome and that, by being overcome, have prepared the ground for a pleasant old age. The mountain climber derives pleasure from having reached the top and is charmed by the view, at the same time as the difficulties along the paths he/she has taken on the way up are also visible – but now seen from an overall perspective. The whole that is in view is described in ways that are reminiscent of Antonovsky’s (1987) concept of ‘sense of coherence (SOC)’, despite the fact that certain elements of this coherence are far from pleasant.

Thus, it would seem that Mary is certain she is at the top of her mountain, a place where she delights in her state and sees beauty in the landscape she has traversed. At the same time, however, she sees clearly how difficult some of her paths have been. She does not repress the fact that she has lived through great hardships or that she is old.

**Discussion**

First, we must pose a critical question concerning Mary’s identification with the theory of gerotranscendence: Can it truly be understood from a narrative perspective, or is it simply a rationalization used to bring the plot of her life story into harmony with a nice theory?

The fact that Mary’s identification with the theory is so detailed and multifaceted could indicate that her narrative is filled with rationalizations. However, contradicting this interpretation is the fact that, before she had ever heard about the theory, Mary had written about her outlook on life as an elderly
person and about aging. In her writing, many of the specific aspects she discusses are in accordance with the theory of gerotranscendence.

One specific example concerns how Mary talked about her changed views on her mother, which had gradually developed during recent years and which were a direct analogy to a case described on the TV program Mary had watched. In this case, however, any suspicions about rationalization can be dismissed, because Mary had described this change in her booklets a few years prior to the TV program, before she had any knowledge of the theory.

Another contribution to the credibility of Mary’s life narrative is her awareness of the fact that memories change over time and her own critical questioning of her own memory. For this reason, we assume that Mary’s narrative is not the product of rationalization, and this assumption enables us to proceed with a discussion of several central aspects of her story.

As mentioned above, prior to our first meeting with Mary, we had initial contact with her via letters and email, and the first author also spoke with her over the telephone on a few occasions. At this point, Mary gave the impression of being a very happy person who was highly satisfied with her life. She seemed to have led what Öberg called the sweet life. But after looking at her life narrative, what emerged instead were similarities to the life course type life as a hurdle race. As described above, such narratives begin with descriptions of childhood losses and problems, and continue with marriage problems, other relationship problems, illnesses, etc., only to have changed for the better in old age. The narrator describes him-/herself as a fighter who has overcome all difficulties. In the end, relationships to children and friends are good, and the individual has a positive outlook on life as an older person. For the most part, this is in good agreement with Mary’s life narrative, and it is therefore reasonable to place her story into the category life as a hurdle race. She describes a life characterized by past crises, which have later been transformed into positive turning points in life, or which she can see in retrospect are bad things that brought with them something good.

As previously mentioned, past crisis experiences have been shown to serve as catalysts to gerotranscendental development. Mary clearly stressed the importance of crises in her life, and the main thread in her life narrative is largely tied to these crises and how they have become turning points in her life. These crises have clearly had a great influence on how Mary lives her life today and on her development toward gerotranscendence.

Mary has also acquired the ability to reevaluate her life, and her past crises and turning points seem to have contributed a great deal to this ability. According to Mary, her close contact with her grandchildren as well as with developmentally disabled people has helped her develop toward gerotranscendence. Her border-crossing imagination and playfulness have been inspired by interaction with her grandchildren, and her capacity for empathy, and for questioning and reevaluation of what is taken for granted have been stimulated by her interaction with the developmentally disabled. In sum,
Mary’s interview narratives would seem to indicate that her gerotranscendental development cannot be explained by aging per se. Instead, her crises and acquired capacity for reevaluation and new thinking have been of greatest significance, in a way characteristic of the life course type *life as a hurdle race.*

The question, however, is whether it is necessary to have lived a *life as a hurdle race* if one is to achieve a high degree of gerotranscendence? In a previous cross-sectional study, Tornstam (1997 b) found that past crises during recent years were associated with a higher level of gerotranscendence, but that this association was not found for the oldest respondents. Because Tornstam’s study focused solely on crisis experiences that had occurred during the two-year period prior to the study, a question remains: What is the importance of an entire *life as a hurdle race* compared with other types of life courses. It would be interesting to compare the narrative life course interviews of people who have experienced different ways of life, as described by Öberg. Such a comparison would enable us to study more closely how different ways of life may facilitate or obstruct development toward gerotranscendence. Could it be the case that achievement of a high degree of gerotranscendence is reserved for those who have lived a *life as a hurdle race*? This question is still waiting to be answered.

**Acknowledgements**

This work has been largely inspired by seminars within The Social Gerontology Group at the Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, Sweden.

The Social Gerontological Group is comprised of, in addition to the author: Gunhild Hammarström, Ph.D., full professor; Marianne Winqvist, Ph.D., certificated psychologist; Peter Öberg, Ph.D., associate professor; Fereshteh Ahmadi, Ph.D., associate professor; Sandra Torres, Ph.D., associate professor; Satu Heikkinen, B.SSc; Clary Krekula, M.SSc.; Anita Wejbrandt, B.SSs.

Homepage of the Social Gerontology Group: www.soc.uu.se/research/gerontology/
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