

The Importance of Intimate Relationships for Aging Well

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Aging in the 21. Century

I) Increased Life Expectancy

- Late life more crucial part of life course: time for self-realization
- New possibilities, tasks & decisions
- Western emphasis on autonomy: Successful Aging

II) Individualization

- As societies, also aging has individualized: less intergenerational support → Importance of partner?!

III) New Norms: Aging & Agency

- Today: aging “*field of agency and choice*” (Gilleard 2010) and “*question of individual effort or failure*” (Graefe 2011)
- Ambivalence: functional when healthy, but potentially dysfunctional

Demographic Aging Social Challenge

Solutions depend (also) on micro-level dynamics and structures?!

Methods

Research Questions

Present: Health changes & limitations?

Future: Negotiating and deciding on aging, autonomy and death?

→ Individual & dyadic questions with demographic relevance.

Care situation impact on social infrastructure & welfare state.

Data

- 5+ Year Longitudinal Mixed-Methods
- Subjective & dyadic perspective on Health – Autonomy – Death

2nd Dyadic Interview

- Dyadic dynamics & narration
- Open-ended & 2-3 hours
- Additional individual questionnaires
- Analysis: Coding (Saldana 2013)

Sample

- 8 German, urban, satisfied couples
- Age: 78-86 years, rather healthy
- 45 years first-time married

Temporality

Change of Perspective on Future:

- Modesty and awareness of finiteness
- Future as..
 - a) Space beyond one's agency
 - b) Threat: pessimistic forecast
- “Happy that we are able to care for ourselves. [...] it won't become better”

Contradictions

Aging vs Agency

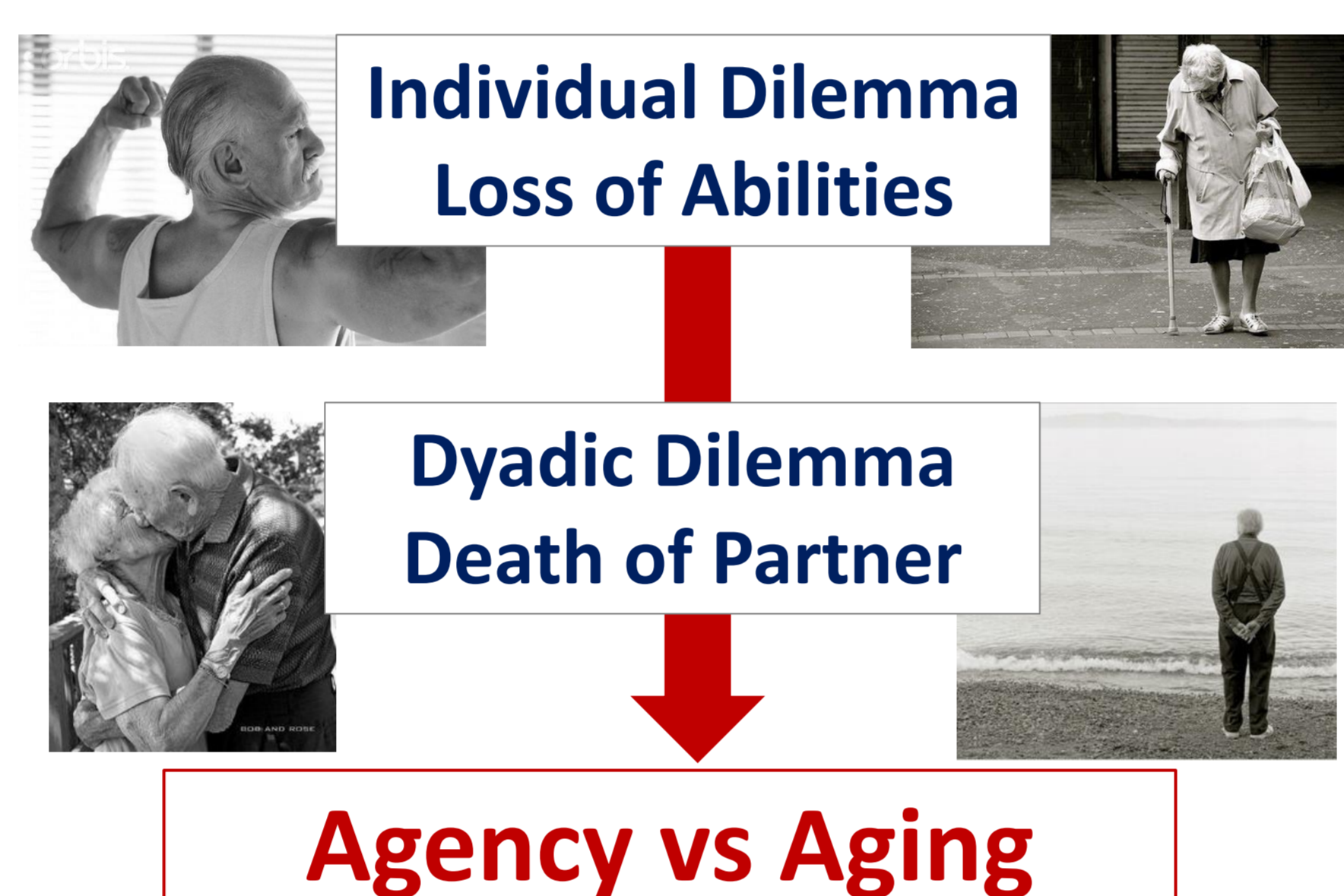
- “*Managing relationships*” (Lewis 2006): stay healthy & shape limited future. But: agency constrained by aging.

Agency vs Repression

- Late & end-of-life decision-making: emotional burden or empowerment?
- “*Death never possible in regard to ourselves*” (Kübler-Ross 1969) vs “*death in old age developmental task and 'on-time' event*” (Chan 2010).

Social vs Individual

- Individualized discourses on aging, but:
 - a) change for others; b) not solely individual experience or decision; c) care: stranger vs family
- Importance of relationships for aging



Aging, Agency & Ambivalence

- FUTURE modest expectations.
- ACTIVITIES “*consciously work on health*” vs failure: unrealistic standards
- NORMS actors not able to switch. Ableism against aged self: “*disgusting*”
- TIMING ‘preventive’ relocation? No pressure vs leave home & life
- REPRESSION “*We won't let us be oppressed.*” “*I do not even think about not having a future.*”

Terminal decline (Gerstorf 2010)

- Subjective “*push*” towards 90s “*unprepared, felt at once old.*” “*completely shocked that body failed*”
- Limit of Acceptance: maintain the self

The Final Loss of Agency

- a) Death part of self-concept: Organizing Death; assisted suicide “*of course an alternative*”
- b) Advance directive vs stranger
- c) Nursing home: threat for the self and identity: “*jail, masses of old people.*”
 - ‘Others’ without independence & individuality: space without agency

Dyadic Aging

The Old Couple – A New Dyadic Phase

- Aging together as privilege vs more time in negative health: joint frailty
- Late life & linked lives. Functioning self necessary? Dyadic re-orientation?!

Processes

- 1) Dyadic successful aging: “*compensation through collaboration*” (Dixon 2011) → protective factor
 - Aging well = aging in relationship? (Gerstorf 2016); vs individualization?!
- 2) Health issues “*almost normative event*” (Freund 2003).
 - Biology pacemaker vs dyadic balance
- 3) Ambivalence of autonomy. Partner as burden vs solidarity?!
 - To which extent do I want to be constrained by my partner's constraints? To which extent do I give my self up to support my partner?

The Importance of Relationships

Functional Stronghold against Aging

1. Partner: co-trainer
2. Relationship: motivation
3. Constrained agency: partner's agency → Dyad protection against Individual Dilemma! Dyadic Dilemma?!

The Self, the Dyad and the End of Life

Functional & Emotional Dyadic Unity

But: Freedom vs Support?

- 1) Self-orientated De-Coupling
- 2) Conscious De-Coupling
- 3) Strong Dyadic Focus
- 4) The Fragile Dyad

Intimate relationships as dynamic structural context of aging: adaptation & re-configuration vs disintegration → Intensified by future individualization

Quantitative Aging Research

- Ambivalence of Agency on a life course dimension (> disengagement)
- Importance of Relationship: functionality and structure
- Dynamic perspective on couples: intra-dyadic change (Gerstorf 2015)

Items

- Relationship Efficacy (Bodenmann 2008)
- Relationship Conflicts (Klingel 2015)
- Dyadic Dynamic Health (Klingel 2018)