

Review articles (systematic or scoping)

Successful Aging: A Scoping Review on Purpose in Life and Physical Activity

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Abstract

This scoping review aims to understand theoretical aspects based on different studies in the literature on the theory of successful aging, life purpose, and their relationships with physical activity and health. The study was conducted on the Capes portal using the keywords “successful aging and life projects and physical activity” covering publications from 2016 to 2023. The study selection criteria were: theoretical, empirical, and review studies published in English, Portuguese, or Spanish in journals, books, and public policy documents. The screening process was conducted in three steps: reading of titles, analysis of abstracts, and full-text reading of the studies. The process was carried out independently by two researchers. Public policy documents were considered, while other grey literature materials were excluded. The review concludes that understanding the intersections between life purpose, physical activity, and successful aging can contribute to the development of new research, public health, and the quality of life of the elderly population.

Keywords: older people, physical activity, successful aging, meaning; health

ENVELHECIMENTO BEM-SUCEDIDO: UMA REVISÃO DE ESCOPO SOBRE PROPÓSITO DE VIDA E ATIVIDADE FÍSICA

Resumo

Esta revisão de escopo, tem como objetivo compreender aspectos teóricos, a partir de diferentes estudos acerca da teoria do envelhecimento bem-sucedido, propósito de vida e suas relações com atividade física e saúde na literatura. A pesquisa foi realizada no portal Capes, com os descriptores “successful aging and life projects and physical activity”, e abrangeu publicações entre 2016 e 2023. Os critérios de seleção de estudo foram: estudos teóricos, empíricos e revisão, publicados em inglês, português ou espanhol, em periódicos, livros e documentos de políticas públicas. A triagem foi conduzida em três etapas: leitura dos títulos, análise de resumos e leitura integral dos estudos realizada independente por dois pesquisadores. Documentos de políticas públicas foram considerados, demais materiais da literatura cinzenta foram excluídos. A revisão conclui que o entendimento das interseções entre propósito de vida, atividade física e envelhecimento bem-sucedido podem contribuir para o desenvolvimento de novas pesquisas, saúde pública e qualidade de vida da população idosa.

Palavras-chave: idosos, atividade física, envelhecimento bem-sucedido, significado, saúde

ENVEJECIMIENTO EXITOSO: UNA REVISIÓN DE ALCANCE SOBRE PROPÓSITO DE VIDA Y ACTIVIDAD FÍSICA

Resumen

Esta revisión de alcance tiene como objetivo comprender aspectos teóricos a partir de diferentes estudios sobre la teoría del envejecimiento exitoso, el propósito de vida y sus relaciones con la actividad física y la salud en la literatura. La investigación se realizó en el portal Capes, utilizando los descriptores “successful aging and life projects and physical activity”, abarcando publicaciones entre 2016 y 2023. Los criterios de selección de estudios fueron: estudios teóricos, empíricos y de revisión, publicados en inglés, portugués o español, en revistas, libros y documentos de políticas públicas. El proceso de selección se realizó en tres etapas: lectura de los títulos, análisis de resúmenes y lectura completa de los estudios. El proceso fue realizado de manera independiente por dos investigadores. Se consideraron documentos de políticas públicas, mientras que otros materiales de literatura gris fueron excluidos. La revisión concluye que el entendimiento de las intersecciones entre propósito de vida, actividad física y envejecimiento exitoso puede contribuir al desarrollo de nuevas investigaciones, salud pública y calidad de vida de la población adulta mayor.

Palabras-clave: personas mayores, actividad física, envejecimiento exitoso, significado, salud

There has been an increase in the topic of life purpose and physical activity, especially in the context of studies on human aging. This topic is considered an important factor for the promotion of successful aging (Kang et al., 2019). Purpose in life is directly associated with different positive health behaviors such as regular physical activity which, in turn, is essential for health maintenance in older adults (Ribeiro; Neri; Yassuda, 2018). The importance of life purpose for successful aging is supported by the multidimensional understanding of aging, which involves not only physical health but also emotional, social and spiritual well-being (Zanjari et al., 2017).

Historically, the definition of successful aging has undergone several modifications and there is no consensus on all of its dimensions. According to Zanjari et al. (2017), successful aging comprises five domains: social well-being, psychological well-being, physical health, spirituality and transcendence, and environment and economic security. A broad understanding of this theory is important for a public policy agenda that will ensure successful population aging.

Considered to be complex and multifaceted, this theory does not possess standardized criteria to define a single concept of successful aging (Lin et al., 2020). However, it is the most widely reported in the literature on human aging (Menassa et al., 2023). The greatest contribution of this theory occurred in 1995, when Paul Baltes (1996) proposed the life-span perspective. Baltes developed a theoretical model of psychological management of the life cycle (Neri, 2007) that reflects on feelings and attitudes around desires, dreams, motivation, wishes, meaning, yearnings, aspirations, life organization, and goals in relation to something that an individual wants to establish or have in life. Baltes called this the “purpose in life” factor, which is characterized by a high potential for successful aging (Kim & Park, 2017).

The life-span perspective has transformed the paradigm for the study of developmental psychology and, consequently, has changed the way of studying aging. The development of this theory was called life-span theory based on the definition of a model composed of three principles: 1) selection, 2) optimization, and 3) compensation. Paul and Margaret Baltes summarize that aging depends on selective investment in domains in which the individual maintains developmental potential and that this investment can result in optimization of functionality and compensation of normative and non-normative losses (Neri, 2007).

The relationship between how individuals can or cannot deal with the multifaceted nature of “successful or unsuccessful” aging is presented in the balance between the direction of gains and losses during life and old age. What can expand successful aging are setting goals, minimizing losses and maximizing gains within the context of the different domains of human development (Baltes & Carstensen, 1996).

Loeb et al. (1966) provided new theoretical contributions, which consisted of a set of definitions on successful aging and six criteria of well-being: 1) self-acceptance, 2) positive relationships with others, 3) autonomy, 4) environmental mastery, 5) purpose in life, and 6) personal growth. Like other principles, these criteria were derived from the theory of successful aging.

The concept of life purpose is expanded and demarcated in the work of Frankl (2008), a neurologist and psychiatrist who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp during the Holocaust. He wrote the book *Man's Search for Meaning* in the form of a diary and notes during his imprisonment. Frankl (2008) described that a meaningful life originates from love, courage in the face of adversity, and meaning in life, in other words purpose in life. According to Anderson et al. (2022), the work of Viktor Frankl discusses the issue of the meaning of life related to the pursuit of meaning. This meaning of life, in turn, can be explained as a perspective on life. It is this perspective that delimits, permeates, and constructs the purpose in life.

AshaRani et al. (2022) explain that purpose in life is a psychological construct associated with positive well-being. Frankl (2008) developed the concept of purpose based on his experiences and emphasized the importance of the pursuit of meaning as a key element in human existence. He defined the purpose in life as a means to achieve the meaning of life and highlighted its capacity as a protector and facilitator when facing daily challenges. Frankl (2008) explained that, although the perception of life purpose may change throughout the life cycle, the need to find meaning remains constant. This fact renders the purpose in life an essential construct in health promotion.

The concept of life purpose, according to Waterman (1993), reflects a role of Eudaimonia in the issues of meaning and purpose of existence. Contemporary theories often take over the classical meanings offered by philosophy. This classical approach reflects the notion of self-realization, which encompasses individual claims and the realization of each person's own potentialities, representing the most significant achievement of life that a human being can aspire to. They include both the attributes shared by all humanity that arise from our common nature and the unique traits that distinguish each individual. The concept of "daimon" is understood as an idea of excellence, a striving for perfection that can confer meaning and direction to an individual's life. The efforts towards the realization of these potentialities, in search of self-realization, result in a state known as Eudaimonia (Waterman, 1993).

Several factors are considered important for successful aging. Within this context, purpose in life is considered a factor of great impact. There is consensus in the literature that the absence of this factor is significantly related to a functional decline in the execution of basic and instrumental activities of daily living and all-cause mortality in older adults (Tomioka et al., 2016).

Purpose in life refers to the feelings and attitudes that individuals have towards their personal existence, such as meaning and direction in attitudes, and choices, as well as goals and plans that can be achieved in the short, medium or long term (Duarte et al., 2020). Thus, life purpose is articulated in different affective, cognitive, corporal, social, political, economic, financial, and health-related aspects such as physical activity.

In other cultures and ethnicities, life purpose plays an important role in establishing achievements. The Japanese, for example, define it as "Ikigai", which consists of a personal

assessment of well-being, an emotional concept in which individuals can look back and see how they lived their lives with joy, pride, and self-satisfaction (Tomioka et al., 2016).

Purpose in life has been treated in literature as a perception inherent to values, desires, and motivations in different life contexts. Studies indicate that individuals who perceive their life purpose positively give meaning to their existence, direct their actions intentionally, are happier, and perceive themselves as independent. Otherwise, they combine existential feelings, sadness, boredom, and hopelessness (Oliveira et al., 2019).

The study of the relationship between physical activity and life purpose in older adults is important for psychology, gerontology, and public health. The aging of the world population, according to IBGE (2022), has led to a significant increase in the proportion of older adults and the search for strategies designed to promote healthy aging has intensified. Within this context, the literature on successful aging highlights that, in addition to factors such as physical health and social well-being, purpose in life is one of the main determinants of quality of life in old age (Wilson-Harding et al., 2018).

A review of articles conducted by Dibben et al. (2024) demonstrated that physical activity has a positive effect on 25 diseases. Thus, the association of physical activity with life purpose should be further investigated. A strong sense of purpose in life is associated with a lower risk of all-cause mortality (Kang et al., 2019), resilience, social integration, relationship quality, emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and well-being in older adults (Anderson et al., 2022), as well as with protection against cognitive losses (Cohen, Bavishi and Rozanski, 2016). Furthermore, based on the largest population study ever conducted, the WHO stated that the world is not on track to make people more physically active. In Brazil, physical inactivity affects 40% of the population (Strain et al., 2022).

In view of the above considerations, the aim of the present review is to understand theoretical aspects based on different studies in the literature on the theory of successful aging, purpose in life, and their relationships with physical activity and health.

Method

This scoping review aims to understand theoretical aspects based on different studies in the literature on the theory of successful aging, life purpose, and their relationships with physical activity and health. The methodology consisted of an extensive literature review on the Capes portal using the search terms “successful aging and life projects and physical activity”. The publications were screened in three steps: reading of titles, analysis of the abstracts, and full-text reading of the studies that met the inclusion criteria.

The following inclusion criteria were applied: 1) type of study: review articles (narrative, systematic, or scoping), intervention studies, theoretical or empirical studies that addressed “successful aging”, “purpose in life”, “physical activity” and their relationships with health. 2) Publication year: studies published between 2016 and 2023, considering the relevance and update of the topic. 3) Language: studies published in English, Portuguese or Spanish; source:

publications in peer-reviewed electronic scientific journals, academic books, and national and international public policy documents. 4) Thematic relevance: studies that directly address the intersections between successful aging, life purpose, physical activity, and health. 5) Access: studies whose full text is available for consultation, either free of charge or through institutional access.

Two researchers independently analyzed the selected studies to ensure greater rigor in screening and evaluation. In the case of disagreement, decisions were made by consensus after discussion among evaluators.

Searches were performed continuously throughout 2023, from March to November, in order to monitor the most recent and relevant publications related to the topic. For this reason, a fixed number of initially retrieved articles was not recorded. The article selection process followed rigorous steps: screening of titles, analysis of abstracts and full-text reading of studies that met the inclusion criteria. Studies that were not directly related to the objectives or that did not meet the inclusion criteria were removed throughout the process. This dynamic approach was essential to ensure that the theoretical basis of the review comprised the most up-to-date evidence available in the literature.

Although publications from the grey literature were excluded, national and international public policy documents were included. These documents were selected because of their relevance for understanding the guidelines and strategies applied to successful aging, life purpose, physical activity, and health. The inclusion of these publications allowed us to integrate practical and contextual perspectives in the scientific evidence reviewed.

The present study explores reflections on the theory of successful aging from a biopsychosocial perspective. By analyzing theories, models, and concepts, the study provides a solid theoretical basis and relevant insights that can guide future research and strategies to promote successful aging, life purpose, and physical activity.

Results and Discussion

Exploring the theory of successful aging

One of the main challenges for science and critical approaches to the theory of successful aging is to outline a common concept (AshaRani et al., 2022; Menassa et al., 2023). What frequently occurs is what Katz & Calasanti (2015) describe as follows: one of the greatest challenges faced by those working within the framework of successful aging is the inconsistency across studies in terms of conceptualization and measures, so much so that the meaning of successful aging is often more implied than delineated. Consequently, a real tension of health measures, lifestyles, political agendas and anti-aging ideals have been forming in a paradigm of theoretical concept cuts. Historically referred to as “productive aging”, “positive aging”, “ideal aging”, “effective aging”, “independent aging”, and “healthy and active aging”, these terms together promote an industry of scientific production (Katz & Calasanti, 2015).

Studies on aging in the field of psychology are relatively new. During the first six decades of the 20th century, the psychology of aging considered the perspective of old age as a period of decline. However, the concept of development as a lifelong phenomenon had attracted the attention of scholars since the 18th and 19th centuries (Neri, 2007). However, it is known that the scientific and cultural environment of that time did not permit different thoughts about maturity and old age.

According to Menassa et al. (2023), successful aging means the acceptance and desire of the elderly person for the process of increasing an active life and, at the same time, maintaining, as far and as long as possible, the activities and attitudes of middle age. It is a theory that orchestrated a way of life that was considered by society appropriate for older people. Menassa et al. (2023) explain that the field of studies on successful aging started to expand discussions by the 1990s, with new social contours.

Menassa et al. (2023) proposed the theory of successful aging based on an adaptation in response to changes, resources, and restrictions. Even when this behavior will be (un)successful. The authors explain that aging can be characterized as a variable balance between gains and losses (in resources), in which losses will increasingly exceed gains.

There are many criticisms directed at theories of successful aging, particularly at the purely biological model that defines aging as the absence of chronic diseases and the preservation of physical and cognitive functions (Lin et al., 2020; Reich et al., 2020). To better illustrate the concepts discussed, Table 1 summarizes the main aspects of successful aging.

Table 1*Definitions of successful aging.*

Authors	Concept/definition of successful aging
Havighurst (1961)	Successful aging is characterized by maintaining an older person's level of activity, with necessary adjustments according to age-related changes. This concept involves satisfaction with important aspects of life such as finances, family, friends, work, club membership, and church activities. Thus, successful aging is seen as the ability to achieve success and satisfaction with both the present and past life.
Loeb, Pincus and Mueller (1966)	Combines life-cycle theories, clinics for personal growth, and mental health perspectives. Six criteria of well-being: self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. These dimensions are defined and their relevance to the study of adulthood and aging is discussed.
Ryff (1989)	Reshapes the perspective of successful aging. A direction related to life projects emerges. A theoretical framework for a model of successful aging is provided that integrates self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, and, particularly, purpose in life.
Friend (1991)	Explains how the healthy aging process is the result of the transformation of homosexuality into something positive considering the following contexts: individual psychology, social and interpersonal aspects, and advocacy in legal and political spheres. The model of identity formation suggests that individuals who positively reconstruct the meaning of homosexuality develop resources that favor successful aging.
Baltes and Carstensen (1996)	Individuals can cope with the dual-faced nature of human aging and the ubiquitous age-related shift toward a less positive balance of gains and losses. Successful aging is achieved by setting goals, minimizing losses, and maximizing gains.
Chang and Dodder (1996)	Congruence between the individual's age reference set and their activity level leads to a highly meaningful existence and successful aging. In other words, being more active in various domains can predispose to successful aging.
Lang and Rupprecht (2019)	Based on Stoicism, Zeno of Citium (332–262 BC) suggests that the virtues of the human mind (e.g., wisdom, courage) prevail over all external difficulties or restrictions in life, such as physical restrictions. The challenges, necessities, risks, or tasks related to the aging process can therefore seem manageable or at least bearable, as long as there is meaning in life and a sense of grace.
Lin et al. (2020)	Considers physical activity, exercise, and quality of life within a biopsychosocial context. Physical activity and exercise influence successful aging.
Menassa et al. (2023)	1. Aging is a progressive process of simple to increasingly complex adaptation. 2. Aging may be successful or unsuccessful, depending on where a person is along the progression from simple to more complex adaptation and the minimal to extensive use of coping processes. 3. Successful aging is influenced by life choices. 4. The self is not ageless. Older people undergo changes that uniquely characterize their beliefs and perspectives as different from those of younger adults.

Source: the authors

Until the mid-1970s, the perspective on successful aging was still very limited, mainly because old age was reduced to levels of physical activity and social participation that, supposedly, should be lower due to the advanced age. This distorted view of a purposeless old age has been constructed by society for decades. Ageism, i.e., discrimination against people based on age, often prevents older persons from pursuing their goals. As a consequence, the situation of older adults is marginalized or stigmatized. The study by Podhorecka et al. (2022) indicates that, by recognizing the meanings and purposes of life of older adults, it is possible to alleviate negative experiences and to promote successful aging. This implies a cultural change,

which requires contributions so that the inclusion of older adults is conceived appropriately and they are valued.

One aspect portrayed in the literature is the relationship between successful aging and its consequences related to prejudices about old age that are a barrier to successful aging. According to Podhorecka et al. (2022), ageism is a concept that comprises prejudice against old age and that exerts effects on society as a whole. This includes restricting the inclusion of older people in the world and in their different social spaces, as well as stereotypical attitudes and a lack of alternatives for preserving quality of life. The effects also affect the barriers to the active aging process. The social marginalization of older adults increases their health problems, with a negative impact on health systems and the expansion of attitudes towards life purposes (Podhorecka et al., 2022).

Yu (2022) describes the relationship between people who pursue their goals and who face frustrating situations in their daily lives, momentarily exhibiting negative attitudes. Becoming or having a subject over 60 years of age, a productive citizen inclined to the intricacies of the consumer market or simply physically active, is therefore not a simple fact. It is important to consider that purposes can simply be achieved with different meanings. However, this will depend on life experiences and stories (Podhorecka et al., 2022) and, possibly, the influence of physical activity.

According to Zhang and Chen (2021), in the case of older people such as the oldest one, the intensity of physical activity decreases with age. This is also observed for life purposes but they continue to be present. It is therefore necessary to determine whether differences between types of physical activities, sociocultural and demographic aspects, and perception of aging play a role in issues of ageism and life purpose.

The theoretical model of Baltes (1996) can be used to explain successful development in terms of goal selection, the optimization of means to achieve these goals, and the pursuit of compensation when the means available to achieve them are not available. It is the result of selection, optimization, and compensation mechanisms at the individual or cultural level that older persons do not necessarily show a decline in the performance of certain tasks usually executed by young people. Not only is this true, but older people can also exhibit elevated levels of a highly specialized performance in the professional field and in solving existential problems (Neri, 2007).

The concept of life purpose evolved together with the theory of successful aging and is considered a behavioral potential that favors health and well-being (VanderWeele et al., 2020). In the literature, this concept is addressed as a factor that maintains quality of life in individuals over 60 years of age. Objectively, this variable is related to characteristics that favor attitudes and a sense of purpose such as motivation, goal management, and self-care, which are directly linked to successful behaviors during human development and self-regulation (Vander Weele et al., 2020).

Reich and collaborators (2020) conducted an ethnographic review comprising the period from 2010 to 2020 on the concept of successful aging in several countries. In open-ended interviews with older adults, asking what successful aging meant to them, the researchers did not identify any relevant studies that addressed the topic in regions such as Africa, South America, Eastern Europe, North Asia, or the Pacific Islands. The answers varied but generally focused on topics such as social engagement, positive attitude, independence, and physical health.

The Stoic view of longevity is based on the principle of optimizing the process of aging through the constant pursuit of purpose. Rather than focusing solely on prolonging life, Stoics prioritize the dignity and meaning of this journey. This means expanding the meaning of life so that it goes beyond the individual, reaching a broader and deeper purpose (Lang & Rupprecht, 2019). This approach can generate resistance or aversion to the idea of simply prolonging existence, placing meaning and the pursuit of meaning as key elements.

The preservation of dignity and of the intrinsic meaning of a prolonged existence assumes a primary role within the context of a Stoic mindset. As highlighted by Lang and Rupprecht (2019), this approach may overcome the mere absence of chronic conditions in later life. In terms of desired lifespan, adopting a Stoic mindset can imply the ability of individuals to express an in-depth assessment not only of life itself but also of their own trajectory as it unfolds. This process may also generate reluctance or aversion to contemplating exclusively the prolongation of existence, prioritizing instead the dignity and meaning that underlie Stoic motivation. Within this context, the Stoic perspective on longevity is rooted in the principle of optimizing the aging process through the incessant pursuit of meaning. In other words, this corresponds to expanding the scope of this meaning to encompass purposes that transcend many issues (Lang & Rupprecht, 2019).

In a meta-analysis comprising databases such as PubMed, Embase and PsycInfo up to June 2015, Cohen, Bavishi and Rozanski (2016) investigated the relationship between purpose in life and mortality from cardiovascular diseases. The authors concluded that a high sense of purpose is associated with a reduced risk of all-cause mortality and cardiovascular events. This finding highlights the importance of purpose in life as a protective factor for health, especially in the context of old age.

Different factors such as achieving successful aging are considered crucial and life purpose is one of the most impactful. The scientific literature corroborates that the lack of life purpose is significantly associated with functional decline in daily activities and with higher mortality of older adults (Tomioka et al., 2016). Thus, promoting a purpose in life can be essential for improving quality of life and for reducing health risks of older adults.

Aspects of physical activity and purpose in life

The literature on the life purpose perspective explains that it is more costly for individuals who need physical activity the most or need to increase it to have life purposes that require healthy behavior changes, such as people at risk of chronic diseases. Thus, the application of

interventions including behavior change strategies that motivate people to have new beliefs and attitudes towards health can be considered important (Kang et al., 2019).

Yu (2022) examines the relationship between the pursuit of purpose in life and the momentary negative reactions of individuals when facing everyday frustrations. The study highlights that life purpose is not defined exclusively by the condition of being or becoming an active person over the age of 60 but involves broader and more subjective aspects. It is essential to understand that purpose in life can be achieved in different ways, contexts, and environments, which will depend on the life experiences and stories of each individual (Podhorecka et al., 2022).

Studies such as that by Silva et al. (2022) indicate that older people with a strong purpose in life, possibly influenced by participation in physical activities, tend to achieve personal goals such as traveling or other objectives and exhibit better functionality in activities of daily living, in addition to greater well-being. The study also highlights the importance of an active and balanced lifestyle, including controlling the consumption of substances such as alcohol and cigarettes, to attain these goals.

According to Pigglin (2019), the concept of physical activity goes beyond exercise and energy expenditure, encompassing political, social, and cultural dimensions. The traditional view of physical activity as a universal solution for public health problems highlights its relationship with social inequalities and structural barriers encountered by vulnerable populations, such as lack of access to adequate spaces and limited time due to working conditions (Pigglin, 2019). The physical activity guidelines of the Brazilian Ministry of Health recommend 150 to 300 minutes of weekly moderate physical activity for additional health gains (Brasil, 2021). Pigglin (2019) suggests that, although important, policies must be complemented by actions that ensure equal access to physical activity, providing suitable and flexible environments for all social groups.

Various factors discussed in this review are related to purpose in life, including age, sex, educational level, income, ethnicity, and physical activity. The *Guia Brasileiro de Atividade Física para a População Idosa* (Brazilian Guide to Physical Activity for the Elderly Population) describes that one of the benefits of performing physical activity during aging is the stimulation of human development and well-being, contributing to living a life in full and to better quality of life (Brasil 2021). A review highlighted that physical activity is an important factor for the life purpose of older people (AshaRani et al., 2022), which is directly associated with successful aging, resilience, and adaptation to age-related changes (Carriedo et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017; Schuch et al., 2018).

Costa et al. (2020) explain that low adherence of older adults to regular physical activity and their moderate perception of quality of life indicate the need for more effective strategies to integrate physical activity into their routine in order to obtain lasting benefits. Self-efficacy, i.e., the belief in one's own ability to perform physical activities, plays a fundamental role in this process. Ghayour, Arabshahi and Saatchian (2023) reinforce that interventions that improve

self-efficacy have a positive impact on motivation to exercise, which is essential for promoting healthy aging.

The literature also confirms that social support plays an important role in engagement in physical activity, especially in old age. Paiva, Gaspar and Matos (2016) highlight the integration of social support and self-efficacy with life purpose, creating a positive circle for maintaining the health and well-being of older adults. Furthermore, studies such as that by Wickramarachchi, Torabi and Perera (2023) indicate that physical activity exerts a positive impact on the strength, balance and functionality of older adults, suggesting that programs focused on muscle strengthening are essential to improve functional performance.

It is also difficult for people with fragile health conditions to have, for example, the self-esteem to perform physical activity, which will also require reinforcement of a more active behavior. Purpose in life is a function of goals associated with essential values, which cannot be missing in life. Thus, individuals with a greater sense of purpose are able to maintain good lifestyle changes, especially in the long term (Kang et al., 2019).

The pursuit of longevity also involves living well and not just living longer. Purpose in life has been treated in the literature as a perceptive feature inherent to values, desires, and motivations in different contexts of life. Studies indicate that older people who perceive them positively give meaning to their existence, direct their actions intentionally, are happier, and perceive themselves as independent (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Sense of purpose is the perception of individuals of their personal development, achievements, happiness, satisfaction, self-love, self-confidence, and motivation to live and carry out their activities of daily living. It is a health dimension that involves the sense that life has meaning and direction and that projections are and/or can be achieved (Ribeiro et al., 2018).

It can thus be said that people, especially adults and older adults, who maintain a good purpose of living in different contexts of life possess essential elements for maintaining health, particularly in situations of fragility (Ribeiro et al., 2018). In this regard, the sense of purpose acts as a resource of resilience against different barriers in the contexts of everyday life, especially those related to physical activity and health.

Considered a psychological resource, purpose in life can help defend and cope with certain actions and personal and environmental implications. Because they are subjective and individual, they are important for adapting to the inability to cope with different situations and mitigate adversities and stressful situations that can help in the management of the real and potential environment. Such resources can also be indicators whether extended life will be lived effectively or with frailty, pain, and dependence (Bandura, 2006), especially at different stages of life.

The domain of life purpose addresses the set of behavioral actions that give meaning to life and feelings of existential fulfillment and perception of life, for example: Is life worth living with clear and positive ideals to achieve? When existential questions about the meaning of life

are not satisfied, the individual develops an existential void characterized by feelings of hopelessness, boredom, aggression, and depression that can evolve into existential despair, in which there is no longer any reason to live (Rigoni, 2014).

Being less aware of a purpose related to something may partially explain why some individuals do not regularly engage in healthy behaviors, including physical activity. Having a regimented life with desires, motivations, expectations of results, and goals is synonymous with self-regulatory strategies that can have many health-related benefits over the years (Hooker & Masters, 2016).

The literature shows that satisfaction with past events and recurring memories directly influence the way older people evaluate their quality of life and are also associated with happiness in the present moment (Bishop et al., 2010). The promotion of positive thoughts and feelings, corresponding to the psychological domain of quality of life, is directly influenced by resilience (Chaves & Gil, 2015). This concept refers to the attitudes and feelings that individuals have about themselves and their existence. Resilience, in turn, impacts not only quality of life but also the meaning, direction of attitudes, beliefs, and choices related to life purpose (Duarte et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2018).

Resilience has been indicated as a characteristic of older people who are older than 100 years old (Yemiscigil & Vlaev, 2021). Resilient older people are more likely to have a good perception of quality of life. This perception is based on positive beliefs and attitudes towards health and old age. This is even the case of centenarians, who have low functional performance and even limitations in carrying out basic and instrumental activities of daily living, as well as comorbidities and chronic-degenerative diseases and reduced intellectual activities and sociability (Yemiscigil & Vlaev, 2021).

A prospective cohort study conducted in the city of Nara, Japan, with 1,853 participants of both sexes (43.3% women) found that older people without life projects were more likely to have perceptions of being older, to suffer from depression, and to have low income, an abnormal body mass index, a tendency to consume alcoholic beverages and cognitive problems. The same study identified that older people with lower financial income exhibited a better sense of purpose (Tomioka et al., 2016).

According to Windsor et al. (2022), individuals who perceive their aging positively adapt to life changes in a more positive way, while those with a more negative perception end up avoiding goals. The authors explain that individuals with greater awareness of their aging process tend to see themselves as having potential for engagement and meaning in an active life.

A look at the issues addressed in this study transcends the biological dimension and focuses on more behavioral aspects. According to Oliveira et al. (2019), the reflection on health should be encompassing and not articulated only in a health-disease view. It is known that affective, social, and behavioral factors protect against the development of different diseases associated with the aging process (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Countries with low development indices like Brazil, especially in terms of health promotion, are overburdened in providing basic and dignified health care to the population, especially older people. The latter are considered a target population for studies related to behavior changes, such as interventions that study the relationships between life purposes and active behaviors, with individuals projecting themselves effectively throughout life and in old age in terms of positive attitudes being a health protection factor (Ribeiro et al., 2020).

One aspect requires further investigation in the context of life purpose, especially in older adults. Duarte, Lopes and Campos (2020) observed that community elderly Amazonians, even in the face of adversities such as morbidities and low income and education, had a positive perception of purpose. This perception was associated with psychological well-being, self-esteem, meaning and direction in life, goal setting, personal growth, motivation, a positive outlook, and the perception of happiness and health. Furthermore, low levels of income or education did not reduce positive outcomes. Thus, the question arises how socioeconomic conditions, access to education, and income may or may not influence a positive perception of life purpose (Duarte et al., 2020). That is, there is still an aspect in the literature that requires further investigation and discussion: the issue of financial income, which may positively or negatively influence life purpose.

Finally, a limitation of this study is that a systematic review or meta-analysis was not carried out, which would permit a more in-depth and quantitative analysis of the evidence on the topic. Nevertheless, this study used terms such as “successful aging”, “life projects” and “physical activity” on the Capes portal, covering review and intervention articles published between 2016 and 2023, in addition to books, scientific articles and public policy documents using significant criteria for inclusion and full-text analysis. However, the lack of a systematic analysis may limit generalization of the results and the identification of possible gaps in the literature with greater rigor. Nevertheless, the study indicates paths for further research, whether cross-sectional or experimental.

Final Considerations

Successful aging is a concept that transcends the passage of time and represents a holistic approach. According to this perspective, aging should not be defined based on the presence or absence of disease but on the quality of life of individuals as they age. In its essence, successful aging involves factors such as physical activity, mental health, and social, financial, political and emotional engagement that permeate a unilateral direction of development.

Criticism directed at the theory of successful aging often points to the supposed exclusion of people who do not fit into certain expected attitudes or behaviors, leading to the idea that they would be examples of “unsuccessful” aging. However, this interpretation does not reflect the essence of the theory, which does not classify old age as “successful” or “unsuccessful”. Instead, the theory discusses the contexts, lifestyles, and behaviors that may be associated with positive aging, considering the diversity of experiences. Although some approaches may neglect

the social, cultural, and political circumstances that are essential for understanding the aging process, the key objective of the theory is to provide support that considers these circumstances in order to promote interventions that respect and respond to the different needs and realities of the elderly population, avoiding simplistic judgments or classifications.

Above all, “purpose in life” refers to the idea that people have goals, perspectives, aspirations, desires, reasons, and plans that guide their actions and decisions throughout their lives. These purposes can encompass many areas such as career, education, family, relationships, health, spirituality, and other dimensions of personal life, in such a way that the surrounding actions and decisions are not types of stable entities. On the contrary, they may be subject to attitudes, knowledge, and/or practices acquired during a process, the same aging that sometimes opens and sometimes closes intentionalities that are as rich or not, according to the viabilities of the subject in response to him/herself and his/her environment.

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