

Book Analysis:

As We Are Now: A Hauntingly Powerful Perspective on Life Course Theory and End of Life

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Abstract

As We Are Now (Sarton, 1973) is a distressing look at the prospect of aging and end-of-life that speaks to fears of physical and cognitive decline, loss of independence as well as to the will of the human spirit to control personal destiny. The themes of the novel follow the life course perspective model showing how individual choices, uncontrollable circumstances in life transitions, relationships, historical and social context, and the lifelong process of adult development all define how we live until our last breath. The protagonist's physical limitations are nothing compared to her psychological challenges. The novel illuminates aging life course theories such as disengagement, linked lives, locus of control, learned helplessness, gerotranscendence, socioemotional selectivity theory and especially the stages of psychosocial development including isolation, generativity and despair. Powerful and poignant yet painful, the novel illustrates how social supports and relationships may be more profound predictors of successful aging and longevity than other factors – a hypothesis that has become a theory over the last 47 years.

Book Summary

“Old age, they say, is a gradual giving up. But it is strange how it all happens at once.” (Sarton, 1973, p. 14) These prescient musings invite the reader into the life of 76-year-old retired, unmarried, childless school teacher, Caroline (“Caro”) Spencer, as she makes her descent from an independent, fulfilling life to a fragile physical and mental state where her locus of control seems lost until her final, defiant act. Sarton uses an effective prose style creating an intimacy between the reader and the novel’s main character as one studies Caro’s journal entries to understand her complexities, convictions, intellect and emotional fragility.

The novel begins after Caro has suffered a heart attack and her older brother, John, and his younger wife unload her at Twin Elms, an isolated, rural nursing home with a handful of incapacitated residents. The home is overseen by two emotionally cruel caregivers, Harriet Hatfield, and her daughter Rose, who provide inhumane treatment for those under their care.

What should have been a short-term rehabilitation stay, turns into Caro’s long-term, hopeless struggle for dignity and quality of life. Sarton leads the reader through old age as a period of decline and deterioration. Caro longs for physical touch whether from a cat or a fleeting gentle soul. She longs to go outdoors but only gazes through a window. Page by page we follow Caro’s spiral down observing her anxiety, anger, depression and emptiness that culminate in her growing rage and desperation to end the nightmare. Instead of condemning Caro’s blazing suicide, the reader almost applauds her for finally finding empowerment and peace in the destruction of her tormentors, while taking her fellow long-term care inmates with her.

Class Concepts and Theories

Sarton’s book captures what Florida Scott-Maxwell wrote about aging, “a time of heroic

helplessness . . . and a place of fierce energy." (as cited in Moody & Sasser, 2018, pg. 49).

Caro's later life represents disengagement theory rather than activity or continuity theory that are more accepted today. She withdraws without much of a fight or anticipation of finding meaningful and rewarding life experiences after retirement. She also relinquishes control to the physical and mild cognitive issues that afflict her. There was no aspect of the continuity theory for Caro. She misses her books, her own home, stimulating and intellectual conversation, and a sense of purpose. Her habits and lifestyle are gone, she is lonely and eventually her independent spirit is also erased in her hellish living environment.

In some ways, Caro displayed motivation according to Maslow's sixth level in his hierarchy of needs theory towards self-transcendence of intrinsic values (Maslow, 1969). Caro's want to do good for the other residents (rejected by Harriet) has her reaching for beauty and goodness beyond her own needs. There is also her yearning for Anna Close's love but in a way beyond physical and sexual desires. Maslow describes this as, "Love at the highest level is love for the being of the person, something considerably more than the mutual customer satisfaction" (Maslow, 1969, p. 6).

Life Course Theory

Individual Development

The concept of human development and aging as lifelong processes (Elder, 1999) applies to Caro as she progresses through Erickson's predetermined stages of psychosocial development. During early adulthood (ages 20-25) Caro experiences intimacy but with a married man that ultimately resulted in more isolation and less intimacy. Since she remained single throughout her adult life and did not have children, she did not forge those caregiving relationships that could

have changed her later life descent. Instead her career as a teacher defined her life and once she retired she suffered role loss or role discontinuity having no replacement for her previous social role in society (Moody & Sasser, 2018).

According to Erickson's stages of development theory, she did engage in generativity during most of her adult life by teaching and mentoring younger generations. However, her older age was characterized by despair. This is a paradox of Caro as Erickson describes this last stage as one that should bring wholeness or a sense of accomplishment (Erickson, 1982). This completeness enables one to face death without fear. If unsuccessful in this stage because of unresolved guilt or lack of accomplishment, then despair and hopelessness occur. This certainly describes Caro's time at Twin Elms. However, she does not fear death, she seeks it in the end.

Agency

Agency, defined as life choices, is the second principle in the life course theory. For Caro, it was a resignation instead of choice when it came to Twin Elms. Caro's life course decisions ultimately took away her choice as this stage of her life. One wonders why Caro had no options to explore, perhaps living with a past student or finding a different nursing home to relieve her current misery, yet she did not pursue these. Her choice was suicide which is consistent with data showing this is a leading cause of old age death (Moody & Sasser, 2018). As Caro traverses the five stages of her grief, she arrives at the final stage of acceptance and makes her fateful choice to take her own life (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005).

Another example of agency would be Caro's limited locus of control until her final demise. Research has shown both learned helplessness and a lack of locus of control are results

of institutional patterns found in nursing homes and prisons that often lead to depression (Moody & Sasser, 2018). Interestingly, Caro's final act was foreshadowed earlier in the novel when she ruminates about society's rage and disequilibrium about the Vietnam War resulting in murderous violence. While she questions why this is happening, ultimately Caro chooses murderous rage herself leading to her final act.

Regarding agency, Caro also lacked spirituality which typically increases with age. Sarton does not give Caro a sense of gerotranscendence where she could find the deepest meaning in the last stage of life by overcoming self-centeredness and fear of death in favor of a spiritual focus. Reverend Thornhill observes she never really embraces her faith. Early in the novel she repeats the Lord's Prayer but this is out of habit rather than belief. Embracing gerotranscendence or religion, Caro may have discovered more meaning in life and found a sense of mastery.

Linked Lives

The life course principle of linked lives, or social synchrony, is a major theme throughout the novel. Caro suffers a series of relationship losses that disrupt her interdependence by removing her emotional sustenance and social support. Her situation may be the result of socioemotional selectivity theory where one purposely prunes relationships for the most positive effect due to short time horizons (Carstensen, Fung & Charles, 2003).

First, Caro's brother, John, who was her confidante through life, is forced to choose between his wife and sister. He chooses the former and abandons the later. Then her transient friendship, despite their differences in socioeconomic status, with fellow resident Standish Flint

is cut short when he dies on the way to the hospital. Finally, Anna Close shows Caro kindness that gives her hope there can still be love and compassion in her life only to have Harriet destroy that expectation when she dispenses with Anna's help and asks her to depart.

The losses accumulate to precipitate Caro's mental and physical decline. This lack of having at least one strong confidante corresponds to the outcomes found in the Harvard Adult Development Study (Vaillant, 2008). In that study, one of the fundamental elements of living longer and healthier is having strong, quality relationships and at least one confidante.

Her other relationships with Reverend Thornhill and his daughter come almost too late to make a difference as Caro has embraced learned helplessness. The humiliation and hostility she suffered at Harriet's hands has made her paranoid and powerless and she is unable to have her mind prevail over her body as Cicero defined successful aging in *De Senectute* (Cicero, 44 B.C./1923). Caro never achieved Cicero's philosophy that "fears and anxieties about old age made way for new feelings of harmony and satisfaction." (Baltes & Baltes, 1993, p. 2).

Caro's story exemplifies the concept that relationships can have more impact on our psychological and physical health as her lack of social supports hastened her demise. Even the "successful, self-confident [can become] helpless and dispirited once social supports are removed." (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, pg. 6) Studies have shown that stronger social ties reduce risk of mortality and increase both mental and physical health (Seeman, Lusignolo, Albert & Berkman, 2001). However, Caro's social convoy model ended with old age.

Timing

An important aspect of the life course theory are life transitions. Caro's inability to

accomplish a positive transition from retirement to old age is the opposite of successful aging (Baltes & Baltes, 1993). Her decline appears to meet the definition presented by Rowe and Kahn (1997) that “aging means rapid decline into frailty and senility” (Moody & Sasser, 2018, p.23).

History and Place

Caro’s generational cohort, the Lost Generation (1883 – 1900), witnessed significant change throughout the 20th Century. Her age stratification of early adulthood in the 1920s – an era of flappers, bootleggers, F. Scott Fitzgerald and the attendant moral decay – may have affected her life course choices of being an unmarried career woman (and mistress).

As well, Caro’s higher socioeconomic status than her fellow residents and caregivers at Twin Elms isolated her based on intellectual and class divides. Despite her SES, Caro did not experience cumulative advantage as she was obviously financially insecure relying on the kindness (or lack thereof) of her brother.

Conclusion

Sarton’s view on old age throughout the novel reflects an ageism that is currently rejected. Aging is not about decline but instead is thriving, achieving wisdom, reaching gerotranscendence or Maslow’s self-transcendence. One would like to believe that Caro, as Sarton herself, would have had more locus of control having lived her life as a single woman during an era when this was not the social norm. Instead Caro’s later stage in life was one of vulnerability, powerlessness and lack of passion or purpose as she descends into despair.

Ultimately what dictated Caro’s sad deterioration was not age nor any physical or cognitive limitations, it was the lack of social supports. Without strong relationships and confidantes, Caro was led to her desperate final act instead of a meaningful last stage of life.

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