

Aging successfully: Experiences, Stories, and Advice from the Region's Older Adults.

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Abstract

Aging is accompanied by challenges, but also by rewards and opportunities. This presentation will explore the results of more than three decades of research on the qualities of successful aging. Featured will be work on how adults become involved in environmental activism, participate in family rituals (like gambling!) and just enjoy their lives with their friends and loved ones.

My husband's 65th birthday party



What *is* successful aging?

- Study of aging began with an interest in loss (the “biodecremental” model)
- Early gerontologists’ approaches mirrored this: “disengagement”
- Later social scientists thought there was more to it than this.

In my graduate work at the UW, I explored this disengagement issue:

Does it exist?

What does it mean?

Why is there so much variation between and among older adults?

Disengagement and eccentricity in young and old adults: Phenomenon of old age?

Social disengagement: controversial but measureable

There is tremendous variability and diversity in development across the life course



Thinking about variability has produced many ideas about what produces “success”.

For example,

- low probability of disease, high cognitive & physical capacity, social engagement with life
- selecting goals and optimizing capacity
- having a sense of purpose
- managing and adapting to changing environments

Of particular interest to me have been the multiple determinants of success, especially within a social context.

And how these develop in a social psychological context across the adult life span.

While still being realistic, accurate and recognizing social constraints such as ageism.

After all, there is cultural ambivalence about growing old:

Two narratives, both limited and potentially ageist and sexist—

- Traditional North American views of aging: decline, loss, wisdom, kinkeeper
- 21st century views of aging: “successful” aging is possible and within individual control, *Lean In*



So let's look at some contexts for the life-span development of successful aging:

- Work & retirement
- Intergenerational relationships & grandparenting
- Personality
- Recreation & Leisure

Work and Retirement

Our personal and societal histories define our work trajectories



As does the *meaning* of work to us

My study of working and retired older professionals
(architects, engineers, physicians)

- All involved in meaningful social relationships, well-adjusted satisfied with their current lives.
- Differences:
 - Employed professionals valued the prestige and challenge of a career;
 - Retirees mentioned supportive interpersonal relationships and the need to complete a job

For example, one executive discussed his need for challenge and stimulation,

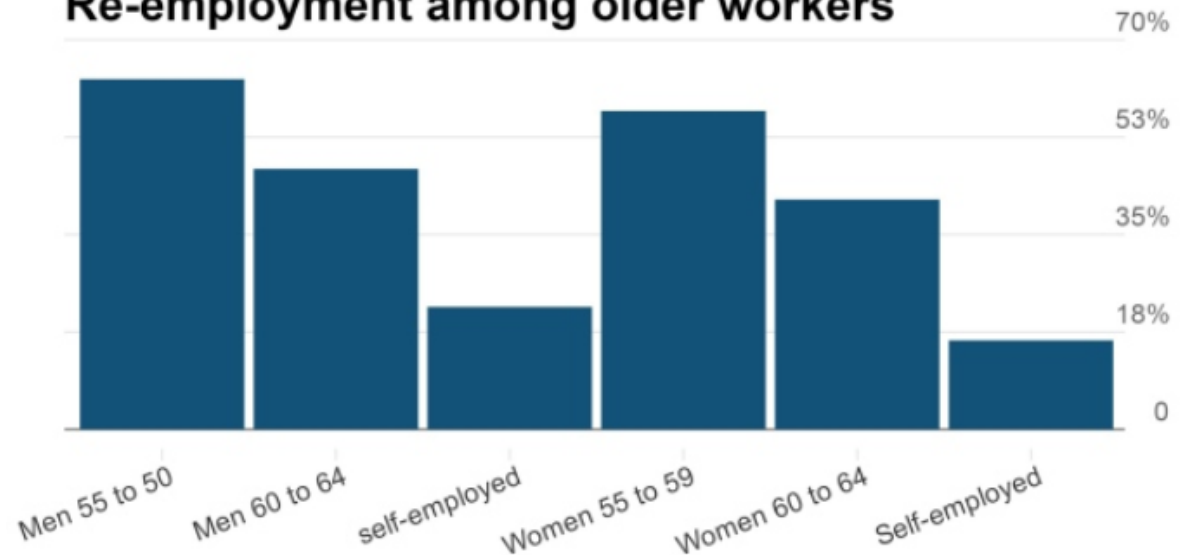
My theory is, why not think Carnegie Hall? As long as you see it there, you can strive and get up there. Once you get to the top, you can coast and rest for a bit .. I knew that one day (my employers) were going to say, 'How would you like to run an elevator in a one story building?' So, I decided no. So I made a phone call ... Within four weeks of doing that, I started to work. So I was 50. Past 50. Again everybody said 'You are crazy, past 40; you can't get a job. I not only got a job, I got a better job. Which again to me was a tremendous lift ... I was fortunate that it was a completely different type of job ... All of a sudden I had to readjust my whole thinking.

And a retiree observed:

I worked 32 years and then I retired. The company wanted me to stay on but I was not prepared. I gave them the terms on which I would stay on for a while, but they didn't want to go along with that ... I wanted the summers off. I said, 'You realize that I may only have three summers left and you want one of them. Maybe three summers in good health. I don't know. I may be in poor health next year. So if you want me to stay on you will have to pay me for this sort of rare period of time that I can offer.' They didn't go for it.

Will the future bring more flexibility? More meaning? More intergenerational conflict?

Re-employment among older workers



Source: Statistics Canada

Made with Chartbuilder

A Statistics Canada study found 43 per cent of people age 60 to 64 who had left long-term employment were re-employed, most within a year of leaving their job. (CBC)

Intergenerational Relationships

How do families promote successful development?

- *Solidarity* has been a major concept in this research
 - Exchange theory suggested we give only what we expect to get back
 - Those in the middle are sandwiched and burdened
 - My work says otherwise:
 - Successful families operate on principals of **global reciprocity**



Most intergenerational families do not exchange help in a mechanistic, “tit for tat” fashion

Instead, members help in a manner that acknowledges:

- Long-term nature of family relationships

- An expectation of, but not insistence on, long term reciprocity

- Reciprocity is a value passed down through generations

Intergenerational support as a family value

A son's comments:

I'd say that today in farming, it's more important to get along first than to have a big income. Like I think the family is the main strength of the farm. The sister you'll be talking to, they come and help us with hay, and we work together. I think you have to be a family first then a farm family second. You still have to love everybody. Like my dad and I are more like brothers than father-son.

(Taylor, Norris, & Howard, 1998)

What promotes this pattern of healthy relating?

- Positive relationships over the long-term
Secure attachment of all members
- Positive communication
Respectful, devoid of inaccurate, stereotyped views, courage to talk about problems

Respectful Communication

When asked whether there were any issues in his relationships with his in-laws, this father of an 8-year-old said: “

Just maybe a small thing, the one in-law, my mother-in-law, she does have, she is British, and she uses bad language. It is not really a big thing in Britain, and it has never been, I mean British people, or Scottish or Irish, swear all the time. They think nothing of saying, “Johnny would you put that God-damned truck down now?” . . . So there was one incident where she used some bad language, and I just had to tell her you don’t use that kind of language in front of the kids, and we don’t use that kind of language ever. She said sorry . . . but other than that, we really don’t have any problem . . . because the kids like going there. I would know there was something going on if they said they didn’t want to go there, but that is not how they are. When we say we are spending the night at grandma’s and grandpa’s, it’s like, I got to get my bag, and then they take off. So I think they are very good.” (Pratt, Norris et al., 2008)

What else facilitates support within families?

- Shared values
 - Moral values
 - Beliefs about fairness and equity
- Generativity
 - Develops in individuals in family context
 - Leads to a Circle of Caring

Shared Values

A 21-year-old man reflects on the value of “independence” taught by his maternal grandfather:

“My grandpa really loves swimming in the ocean. So he would go out floating on his back for hours at a time...When I was younger, I used to stand on the shore and watch him float out. He would disappear and come back and ask me if I wanted to go out. I did once and people were worried because I was only ten years old. My parents and my grandma were concerned, ‘Oh, he’s too small,’ even though I was with my grandpa. But what he said to me stuck. What he said was I need to know my own limits, my own abilities... I shouldn’t ignore what other people were saying but I should do it. Other people are going to have their opinions and their worries and their concerns, but being independent is taking that stuff into consideration, but then also doing what you can.”

Generativity: A critical concept

Generativity (Erik Erikson)

- Beliefs and behaviours that indicate concern for, and care of, future generations as a legacy of the self
- Reflected in parenting & other family relationships, teaching, mentoring, religious involvement, civic or political engagement

A highly generative grandmother:

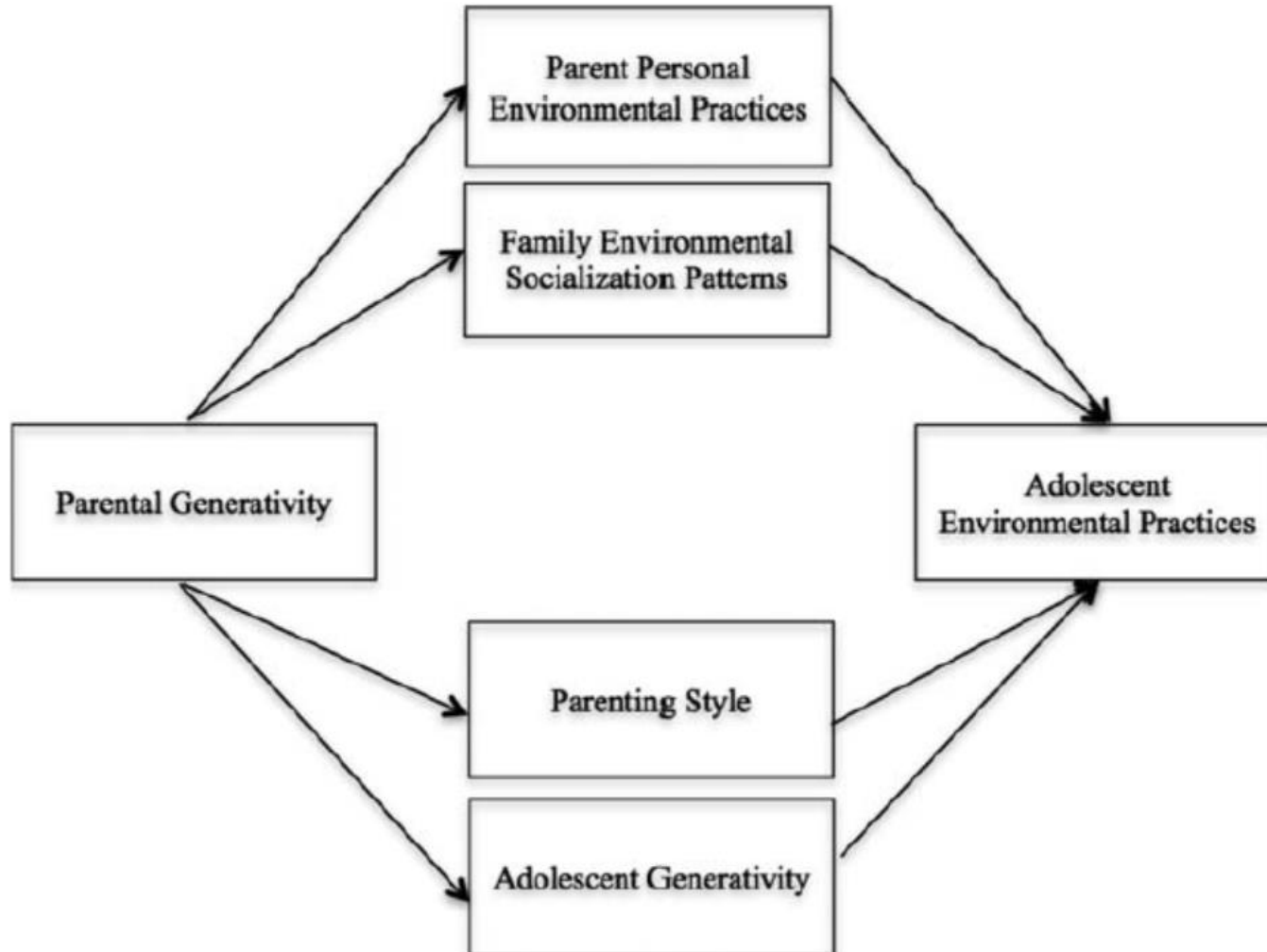
“One day while my husband, grandson Sandy and myself were at the park, we ran into a group of kids. Instead of playing nicely with other, they were picking on one little boy, calling him names, and saying mean things. You could see the hurt on his face, in his eyes. When Sandy asked why they were being so mean, we explained that the names they were calling him had to do with where the boy’s family was from. We explained to Sandy that it does not matter about where people come from, or the colour of their skin. Everyone is the same.”

Strong connection to environmental concern
and activism in adults of all ages

Earth mothers and fathers

- Are generative
- Are authoritative
- Concerned about the environment & engage in sustainable practices
 - Which are modelled by their adolescents

(Pratt, Norris, Alisat, Bisson, 2013)





Generativity and Family Leisure

What role does family leisure play in the expression of generativity?

Family leisure:

- time members spend together in free time activities;
- Produces improved communication, strong family relations
- Personal benefits to grandparents: health, self-esteem, worth, intellectual stimulation:
 - Opportunity to teach, mentor and create a family legacy



“He’s teaching me how to sail this summer and I am really excited about that—to really have that one-on-one time. But it’s because the realization that I do have some pretty special people there to give me knowledge to help me.” (Jeremy, grandson)

Gambling and family leisure

Why did we care about gambling among seniors?

- Negative media about competence
- Interest in patterns of family gambling
 - Gambling as a family ritual
- Support from United Senior Citizens of Ontario
- The “Bus Study”



“Don’t bet the farm”: Gambling among Seniors in Rural and Small Ontario Communities

What is the intergenerational family context of later life gambling?

What is the meaning of gambling as a recreational later life activity?

What are the gambling attitudes and behaviours in small & rural communities?

What health promotion strategies do older people have to share with us?

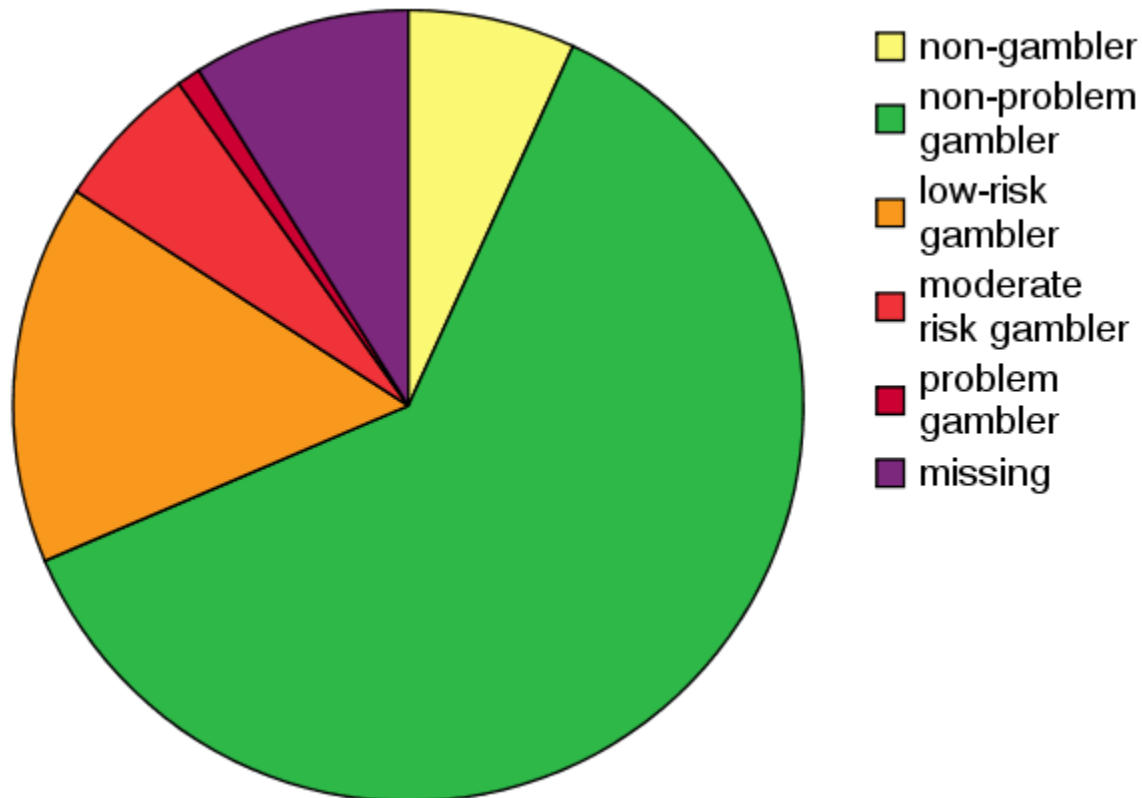
Norris & Tindale, 2008

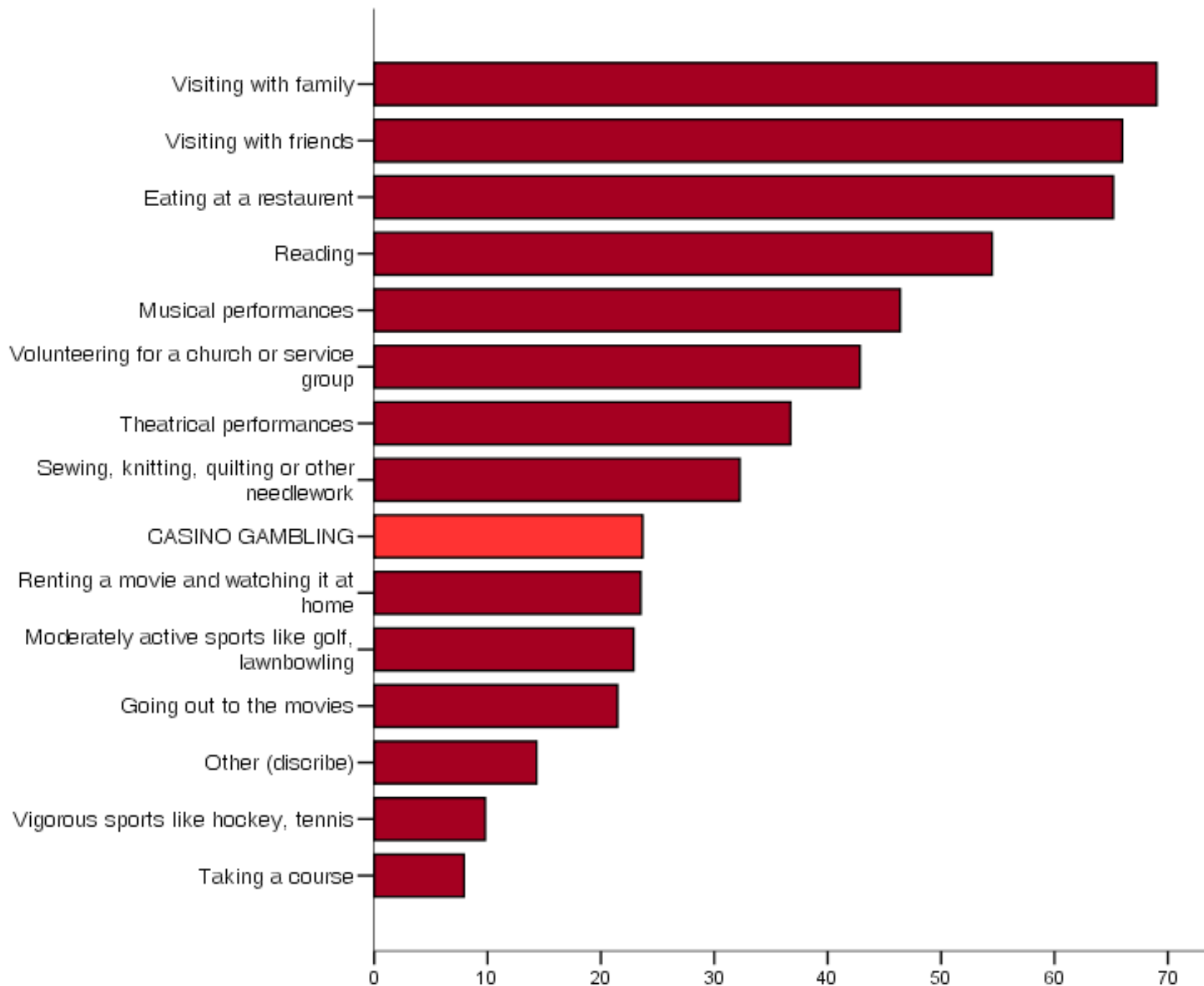
Sample: >2000 seniors from rural Ontario

Findings:

- Most gambled
- Low incidence of problem gambling
- Positive family environment buffered risk
- Gambling is a social activity, including with family
- Older adults use protective strategies:
e.g., setting a limit

Gambling risk among rural seniors





Higher risk for problem gambling when the family climate is not good.



Tempers flare in the local Bingo hall as Mildred touches Helen's good luck charm.

Communities where gambling is part of the culture

Similar patterns among older adults

Metis: family warmth buffers risk

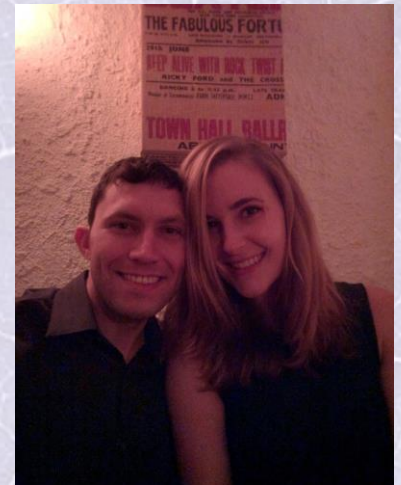


Ontario Francophones: lower risk, contrary to expectations, family warmth still buffered risk. A unique community.



Bryan's Study

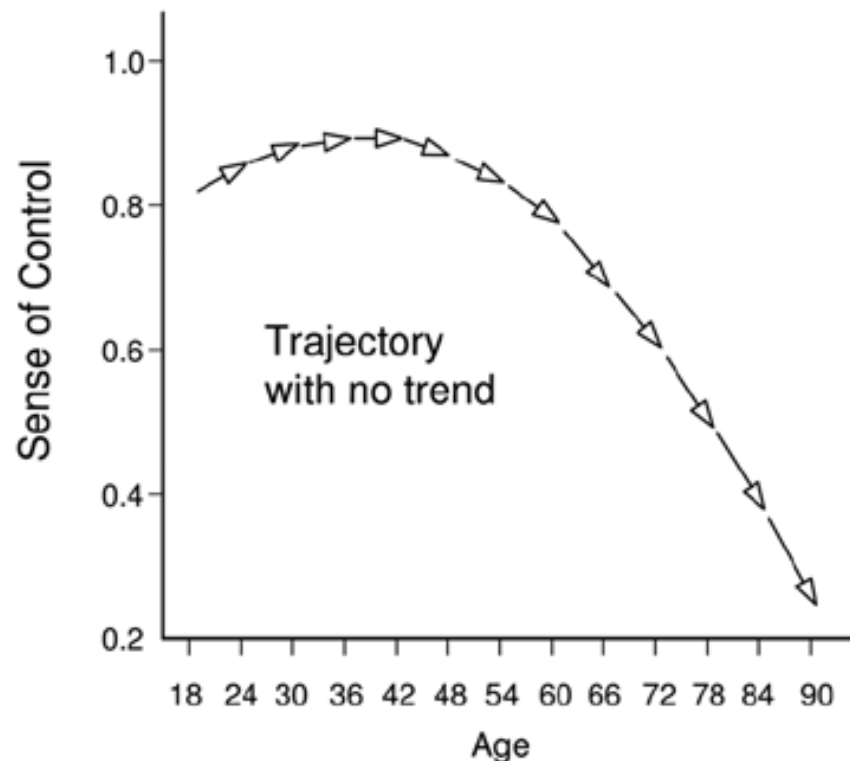
Does gambling have an effect on perceptions of control?



The role of personal control in successful aging

- Past research in LTC: older adults who were able to make their own choices had more positive health outcomes than those who did not.
- Even the *illusion* of personal control can have positive effects.
- Control could contribute to the development and maintenance of competence: contributes to successful aging.

Research suggests that as individuals age, their sense of control declines (based on data collected in the 1990s)



BUT....

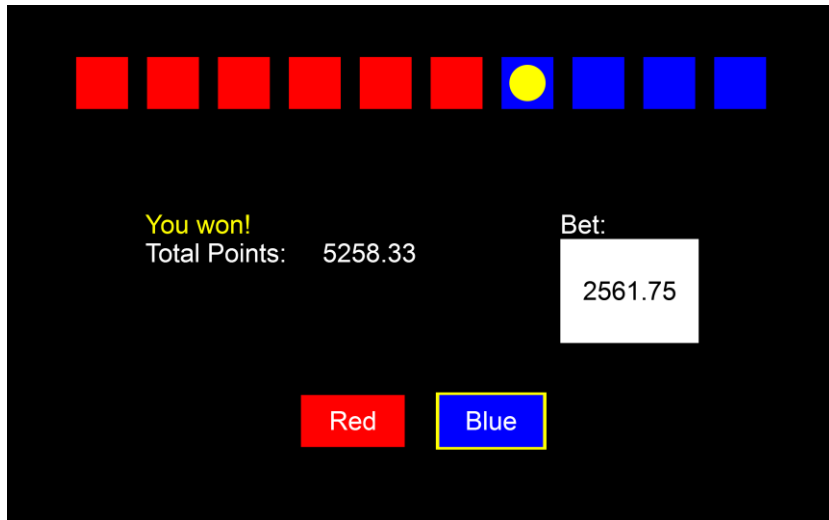
- Maybe gambling could temporarily reduce this decline, as
 - when individuals gamble they succumb to gambling biases (the gambler's fallacy: that they can control the outcome)
- To test this, we designed an experiment to see if gambling influenced sense of control, and to see if there was a difference due to age.

Study 1

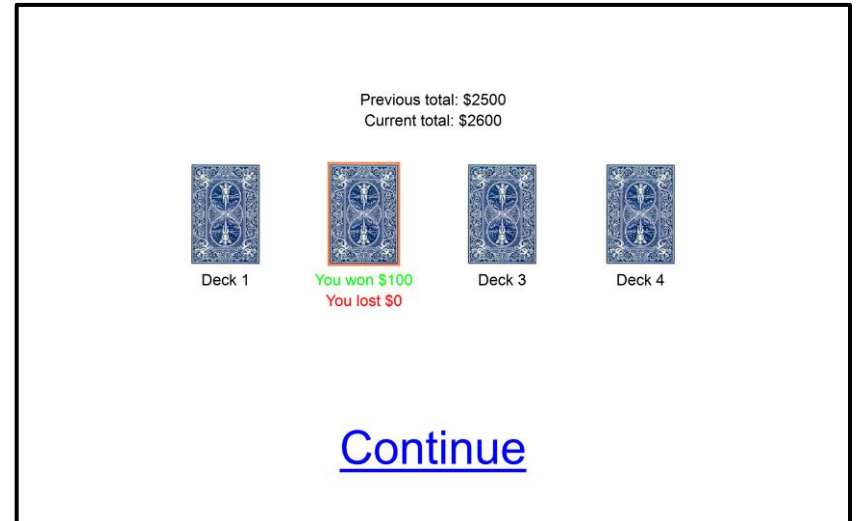
- 90 undergraduate students
- Answered questions about perceived control and mood.
- And either did a gambling task or read an amusing article (as a control)

Methods

Cambridge Gambling Task (Rogers et al., 1999)



- Iowa Gambling Task (Bechara, Damasio, Damasio, & Anderson 1994)



Cambridge Gambling Task

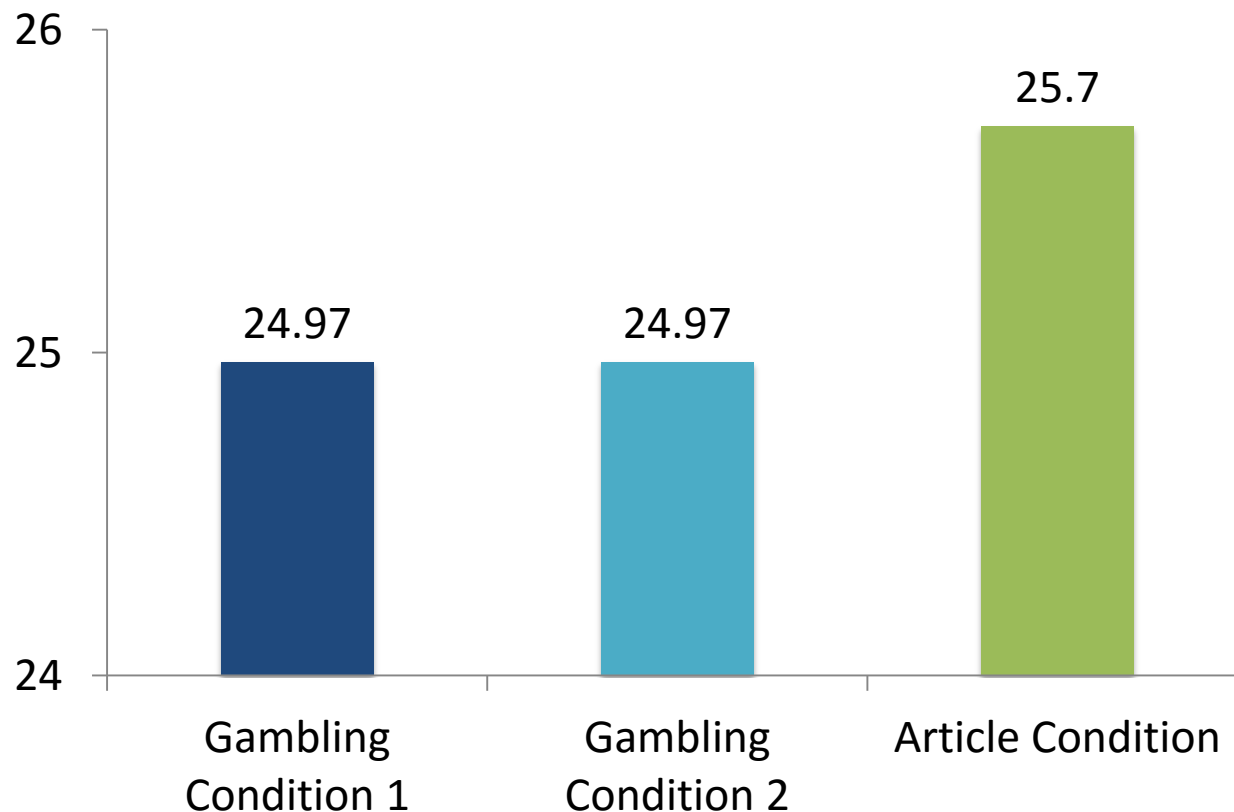
- Participants presented with 10 cards, with blue or red backs.
- Bet on which colour a token will be found under.
- Start with 100 points and if total drop below 2, next set begins.

Iowa Gambling Task:

- Select a deck of cards and win or lose a randomly assigned value of money
 - 2 of the 4 decks have a positive value; 2 negative
 - Begin with \$2,000; 200 trials

Study 1 Results

No significant difference in sense of control for undergraduate students across conditions



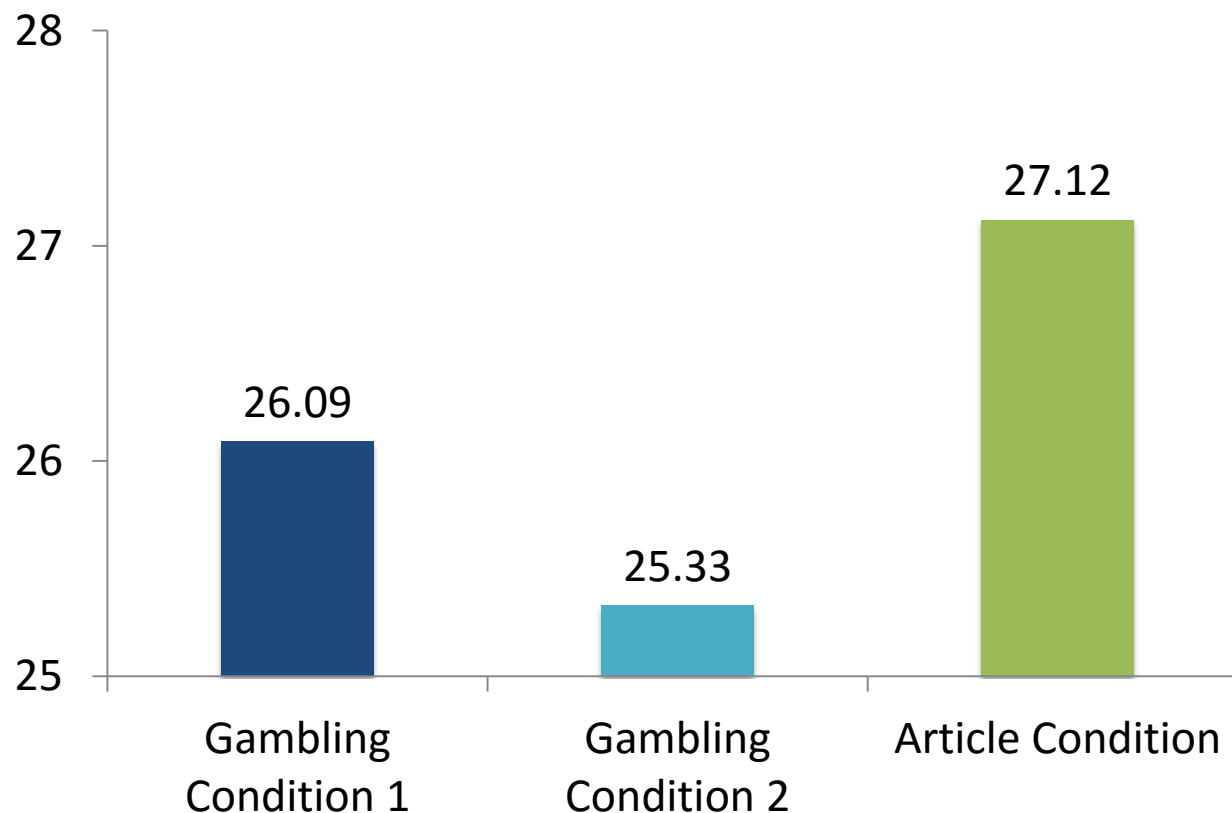
Study 2

- Replicated study 1 with older adults, with many participants being Third Age Learning – KW attendees

A sincere thank you to those who participated, this research would not be possible without you!

Study 2

There was no significant difference in sense of control for older adults



Why didn't it work?

The importance of cohort differences



- No differences among conditions for sense of control
 - gambling does not appear to influence sense of control
- Older adults reported higher scores for sense of control than did undergraduate students

Why?

- education moderates sense of control in older age
- Since the 1990s, older adults have gone from 4% educated above college/university to 29% at present

This increase in overall education for older adults could explain why the older adults reported higher sense of control than the undergraduate students

To recap

Thinking about what it means to age “successfully” has led to many ideas:

For example,

- low probability of disease, high cognitive & physical capacity, social engagement with life
- selecting goals and optimizing capacity
- having a sense of purpose
- managing and adapting to changing environments

We all have limitations as we grow and develop

- Poor health, scarce personal resources, difficult histories.

But

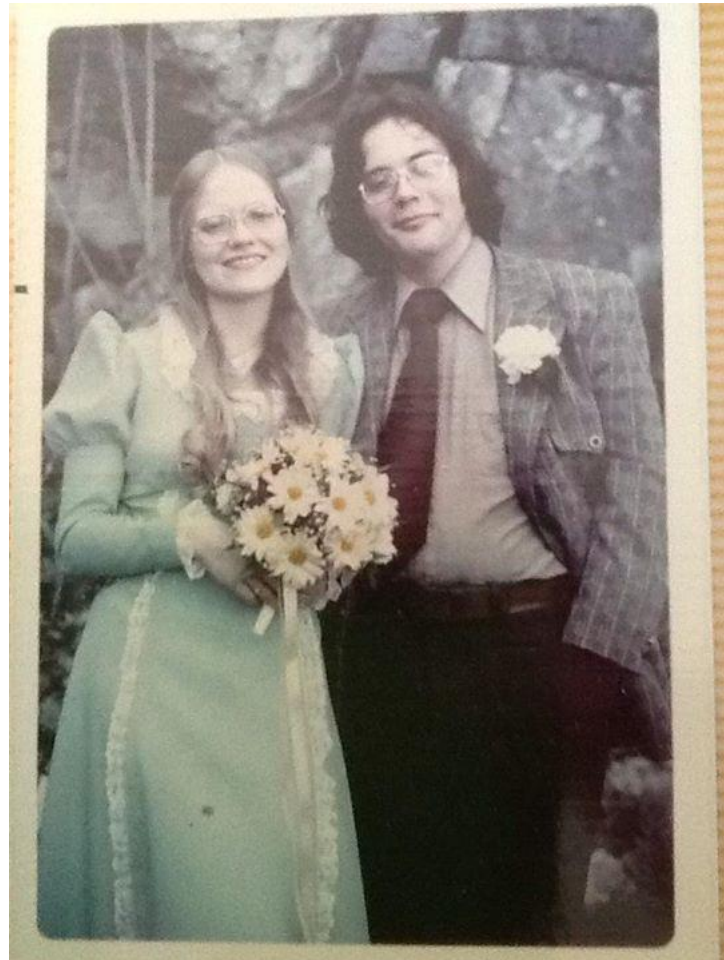
- A famous researcher coined the useful, positive (although now overused) concept of *plasticity*
- It reminds us that there are many paths to success and many individual differences in finding those paths.



What advice can we gain from the positive agers in my studies?

- Work on positive intergenerational relationships.
- Provide support without an expectation of repayment.
- Share your values with younger adults
 - Mentor them, teach them, and share your stories
- Do your best to communicate frequently (even if you don't like texting!) and avoid stereotyping.
- Work or retire when you want to.
- Exercise control.
- Take and interest in the world
 - And make an effort to leave it in a better state.

1973



2013



Waiting for the Grandbaby, 2016



Thanks to my husband for decades of support, and thanks to all of my friends and family for the pictures I've used in this lecture!

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