

Amia Lieblich, *Narratives of Positive Aging: Seaside Stories*

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BOOK REVIEW

Amia Lieblich, *Narratives of Positive Aging: Seaside Stories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 208 pp. ISBN: 978-0199918041.

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At 65, recently retired from Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Amia Lieblich decided to embark on a gerontological project that she hoped would enjoy popular and academic appeal. She planned to draw on her influential contributions to developmental psychology—among Lieblich's books were studies on the kibbutz and how military personnel matured into adulthood—and to build on her pioneering experiences as a narrative researcher. Lieblich wanted *Narratives of Positive Aging* to reach three distinct audiences: aging persons adapting to transitions such as retirement, scholars and readers in fields such as narrative studies and gerontology, and professionals who employed qualitative methodologies in the behavioral/social sciences and in social work.

Narratives of Positive Aging “describes and analyzes a field study of a seaside community of aged women and men, who seem to embody the idea of positive or successful aging,” Lieblich states in her introduction (p. ix). “Belonging to this community is not defined by formal membership and does not require any fee. The community is located in nature and its boundaries are loose; joining it is spontaneous and gradual.” Lieblich's exploration of gero-narrative-psychology offers readers much more than a sampler of vignettes and portraits of age. The (self) representations in *Narratives of Positive Aging* invite readers to move beyond the particularities in the book, which situate elders' reminiscences in a specific space and moment. In *Narratives of Positive Aging*, we gaze upon faces and listen to voices of maturity that compel us to revise and broaden our vision of what it means to grow older.

The idea behind the book emerged while Lieblich was walking on beaches near Tel Aviv, Israel. She observed customs, rarely deviated from, that were shared by roughly 30 individuals who (within the author's view) got together at a certain time and designated site. The women and

men whose stories constitute the core of this ethnography arrived at the seashore every day between 5:30 and 7:00 a.m. They came to swim, to exercise, to watch the waves, and to talk over coffee. These elders dispersed by 9:00 a.m.; they returned to the same cafe early the next morning.

Narratives of Positive Aging is based on personal observations and open-ended interviews conducted from 2006 to 2007. Lieblich's subjects were self-sufficient and non-institutionalized. They ranged in age from 60+ to almost 80. (No one grew older than 70, however, since participants repeatedly chose to celebrate the same birthday year after year.) The seaside set boundaries for the story flow. "This beach environment was the growing ground for positive aging, as I experienced and studied it," reported Lieblich (p. 34). "A sense of community, daily routine, contact with nature, physical exercise, and selectivity of discourse—all contribute to these aging individuals' wisdom as demonstrated in their behavior and life stories."

After describing the environment in Chapter 1, Lieblich devotes subsequent chapters to each of the book's major themes, which are amplified by the reflections and recollections of the individuals whom she interviewed. She seizes on routines in seating arrangements at cafe tables to underscore the regularity of time and constancy of space (chapter 2). Chapter 3 teases out the meanings of "stopping time." In the minds of the author's informants, the term connotes staying healthy and taking advantage of anti-aging remedies, all the while denying (however futilely) the proximity of death,

The most fascinating window into the culture of aging in *Narratives of Positive Aging* comes in Chapter 4, which describes the nature and dynamics of the small community that the old people forged on the seashore. "Social life in the beach community is best characterized by the abolishment of socio-economical stratification," asserts Lieblich (p. 102). "The established society is far from homogeneous to begin with, but, as reflected by the narratives, it has created a partial, temporal homogeneity in the service of harmony and peace of mind for all." Interestingly, Chapter 5—"Creating a Bubble"—reverses motifs developed in the preceding chapter. Lieblich here posits that the sense of community at the cafe is maintained by respecting taboos—that is, by avoiding mentions of death or the deceased, by keeping serious conversation to a minimum, and by side-stepping problems (including Israeli wars and political skirmishes). Interspersing conversations with

humour, paying compliments, and feasting eyes on the sea were strategies that enabled individuals to withdraw into the safety of their own spheres.

In Chapter 6, Lieblich addresses “wisdom, aging, and stories,” which has become a frequent (albeit quite contested) topic in gerontology-inspired narratives in psychology and spirituality. After reviewing the writings of such trailblazers as Erik Erikson, Paul Baltes, Ursula Staudinger, and Bertram Cohler, she acknowledges that different kinds of ordinary wisdom are manifest with advancing years. Lieblich then goes beyond the academic literature, recapitulating matters learned on the beach from interviews and interactions with age peers. She celebrates the wisdom that inheres in “their deep acceptance of age and their reconciliation with their changing time horizon, body, and abilities, while actively fighting against them, as we have seen throughout the book” (p. 158).

How is it that *Narratives of Positive Aging* can move so effectively from pointillist details to universals of aging? Let me suggest three reasons. First, Lieblich recognized that there are many pathways to growth—sometimes occurring when subjects suppressed or denied facets about their identities in telling their stories with trepidation as they spoke into a tape recorder. Second, she revisited theories that other scholars had discarded as obsolete. Twenty of the 150 references undergirding the book were published after 2010; only 40 more appeared between 2000 and 2010. A master of cross-disciplinarity, Lieblich knows how to integrate theoretical nuggets old and new, ones which could inform her story without predetermining its outcome. So it is not surprising, third, that a metaphor animates Chapter 7, “Concluding Reflections,” in which she proposes that rust’s patina symbolically represents variegated attitudes toward aging. Rust conveys the transformative, transitory nature of temporal change. And rust always makes us wonder what lies beneath a given surface. Rarely do we appreciate the beauty that rust affixes to aging objects; we cannot see it for what it is.

Lieblich ends her book with a holistic view of positive aging:

Being content and well-adjusted to aging consists of a multitude of elements and a variety of formulae that combine them. In my beach community, the prevalent combination, which contributed to and explained the experience of positive aging then and there, can be summarized as adopting attitudes of reconciliation and moderation; keeping your life story open and dynamic; and establishing a routine that includes play, laughter, and exercise in

a natural, beautiful setting, among friends. Although it may sound hard to find, the seaside moveable community has developed these characteristics spontaneously, out of the ordinary wisdom of the women and men who comprise it. (p. 168)

Recognizing that the author interjects snippets about “positive aging” throughout the text, I nonetheless found it curious that she reserved her fullest definition of “positive aging” for the book’s last paragraphs. Perhaps Lieblich wanted to leave the concept open-ended. *Narratives of Positive Aging* presents provocative clusters of divergent ingredients ascribed to positive aging, which operate on different planes without foreclosing other possibilities, such as (self) compassion. Positive aging, in Lieblich’s account, seems to me largely to consist of a mixture of ordinary traits coupled with age-old prescriptions for healthful longevity. *Narratives of Positive Aging* makes clear that elders who embody positive aging must juggle many personae: they have learned over time to abandon single-minded ambitions and to let go of fears and resentments that might hamper equanimity, personally and collectively. Those who came together as egalitarian peers at the beach cafe near Tel Aviv, confirms *Narratives of Positive Aging*, managed to disregard class differences and to surmount gender biases. For the sake of belonging to a community, which considered itself spontaneous and resistant to superimposing rules, individuals in this book exercised personal control as they saw fit.

Amia Lieblich’s notion of “positive aging” does not jibe with Lars Tornstam’s (2005) analysis in *Gerotranscendence*, a classic she does not cite. Nor does this book attempt to clarify distinctions among “successful aging,” “healthy aging,” “vital aging,” or “active aging.” The value of *Narratives of Positive Aging* is to encourage readers to make connections—ones that are wise in interpreting common threads in everyday instances and shrewd in assessing the possibility for consilience in expert opinions.

Lieblich succeeds in conveying fundamental meanings that underlie the thoughts and actions of ordinary elders in a faraway land. If we see and hear her aging subjects, we might have more success in constructing the narratives that we invent for ourselves as we ourselves age.

Reference

Tornstam, L. (2005). *Gerotranscendence: A Developmental Theory of Positive Aging*. New York, NY: Springer.

W. Andrew Achenbaum, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of History and Social Work at the University of Houston. His area of specialization is the history of aging, ranging from images to policymaking to spirituality. He has published many articles and books, the most recent of which is *Robert N. Butler, MD: Visionary of Healthy Aging* (Columbia University Press, 2013). He is a member of the editorial board of *Narrative Works*, and has served as Visiting Chair in Gerontology at St. Thomas University.