Successful Ageing: By Whose Definition?

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January 2010

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Adelaide,
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PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM THIS THESIS

Refereed Journal Article:

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Current mainstream models of successful ageing have received criticism in the literature, especially Rowe and Kahn’s (1987) model, the most widely accepted theory of successful ageing in gerontology. A key aim for the present study is to challenge the key mainstream theories of successful ageing. This thesis asks whether the dominant perspectives on successful ageing can be challenged by directly consulting older women about how they see the roles of religion and spirituality in ageing well and by unpacking specific problems identified in the literature. Criticisms include the lack of consultation with older people by successful ageing researchers. A second issue is the negative way that the last phase of life, or ‘Fourth Age’ (Laslett, 1989), is represented in successful ageing theories and also in the field of gerontology and society generally. The leading models of successful ageing from Rowe and Kahn and Baltes and Baltes (1990) postulate that successful ageing is contingent on certain capacities and that successful ageing comes to an end when health and good functioning, or the capacity to employ adaptive strategies, fails. Hence life in very old age is represented as a picture of loss and decline with no positive prospects. A third criticism relates to the lack of inclusion of religious and spiritual affiliations which may be important resources for psychological, spiritual, and existential well-being, particularly during the final phase of life. This issue is investigated with participants identified as both spiritual and religious (SR) and as spiritual only and not religious (SO). Some researchers have argued that women do not age as well as men and that older women are usually less financially well off and in poorer health than their male counterparts, across all levels of socio-economic status (Greene, 2003; Smith
& Baltes, 1998). The views of women were sought in order to contribute to balancing the gender scales of ageing well. The focus in this research is on the views of women who are in midlife or older on successful ageing. The research design, of mixed models, used qualitative data derived from focus groups and in-depth individual interviews supplemented by quantitative data gained from surveys. Three broad central themes encompassing participants’ views on successful ageing were identified. Most participants viewed life as a journey of growth and development and for some this extended beyond poor health and functioning. Autonomy was valued by most participants. Relationships were also important, and nearly all participants gained much personal satisfaction from generative activities, consistent with the literature. Some participants provided examples of successful ageing occurring in the final stages of life or ‘Fourth Age’ (Laslett, 1989). A number regarded the current options for frail aged accommodation and end-of-life care with fear and dread. These findings point to the need for researchers and policy makers to listen carefully to the voices of ageing people. Based on participants’ comments there is a need for informed and tailored changes to be made in policy, planning, physical accommodation options, and, crucially, to the training of those who work with older people. The development of more positive ‘whole of life theories’ of successful ageing is urgently required in order to counterbalance the dominant, negative perspectives on the final phase of life.
STUDENT CERTIFICATE

This work contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or tertiary institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give my consent to this copy of my thesis when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and for photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my two supervisors for their support, and patience, and encouragement – couldn’t have done it without them.

Dr Lynn Ward – School of Psychology, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Adelaide
Professor Helen Winefield – School of Psychology, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Adelaide

I acknowledge the funding which has made the work for this thesis possible.

- Scholarship provided by the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Discipline of Psychology at the University of Adelaide
- Funding towards a conference poster.

I would particularly like to thank the generous participants who shared their stories and their life journeys with me and made this thesis possible.

I am very grateful to my dear husband Andrew Mortimer for his endurance, patience, support, and encouragement in this long journey.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my good friends and companions who have listened and talked and read my scripts and held my hand when times were tough. In alphabetical order they are Deborah Brackenreg, Bonnie Challis, Rosanne DeBats, Jim Fletcher, Therese Mayo, Lisel O’Dwyer, Giovanina Severino, and Jeannette Stanfield. Many thanks go to Nicky Bennett who was a great help with polishing up the final long document and also to Cyndi-lou Andrews from Red Gecko Editing for her terrific assistance with the final changes to complete the thesis. I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Joyce Norman, who died aged 89 while I was doing this research and my dad Alex Norman, a WW2 veteran who didn’t reach sixty years of age.