



Looking back, looking forward

Interpreting personal stories in later life

Ashley Carr, Helen Kimberley and Simon Biggs

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Ashley Carr is a Research Officer, and Helen Kimberley is Acting Senior Manager, in the Retirement and Ageing transition team in the Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre. Simon Biggs is Acting General Manager of the Research and Policy Centre, and Professor in Social Policy and Gerontology at the University of Melbourne.

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67 Brunswick Street
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ABN 24 603 467 024

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1 Introduction

In a previous study the topic of later life meanings was approached from various social, cultural and historical standpoints (Carr, Biggs & Kimberley 2013). It was shown that there are many ways and forms by which older adults are able to make sense of their lives and experiences. The study also intimated the need to move away from economic and employment-centred models of later life, frameworks that tend to dominate and stifle debate about what it means to grow old in contemporary Australian society. Such a move holds much potential to shift ageing stereotypes and influence wider debates on policy related to ageing.

The following study elaborates on this approach, building evidence of the experiences, values and ideas that define and shape later life. It does this by engaging directly with older adults, by listening to the stories older adults tell about their lives, hopes and aspirations. It deals also with loss and disappointment, aspects of the life course equally important in the search for meaning.

The study adopts a life story approach, wherein the narrative of a person's life is understood to contain elements that communicate or imply meaning. Such an approach has been used in a wide variety of studies involving people of ages. It has proved fruitful in studies of older adults, particularly in terms of life review and reminiscence, and is recognised as an effective way to capture later life experiences. Indeed, Cole and Sierpina (2007) describe research and practice relating to narrative and creativity as one of the leading edges of humanistic gerontology. An exploration of 'life as story' offers a unique way of viewing the ageing process (Kenyon & Randall 1999).

The study is preliminary and exploratory. It forms a starting point from which ideas and interpretations of life stories may be further developed, and integrated into other lines of inquiry. At the same time, it explores stories with an open mind to discover the links, themes and characteristics of later life meanings. This brief report outlines the approach taken and the importance of narrative in making sense of life as lived, and discusses some initial findings. Overall, it aims to prompt much-needed discussion of the stories and ideas that shape the ageing experience.

2 Method

The study used focus groups and interviews to engage directly with older adults and collect life stories. All the participants were over 60 years of age and were asked for their consent to take part. An attempt was made to select people from a range of backgrounds and different life circumstances. While the sample is not representative of Australia's older population as a whole, this approach recognises diversity as it relates to chronological age, living arrangements, cultural background, wealth, gender and so on.

Focus groups were used during the early stages of research, mainly for general discussion of issues related to ageing. They were also a good way to introduce participants to the study and generate interest in the interview and life-story process. Three focus groups were held, ranging in size from two to four members. An interpreter was used for the focus group which included two Chinese-speaking participants.

The study's main research component consisted of interviews conducted with fifteen older adults, some of whom were interviewed more than once. Each participant was asked to present their life story, which was recorded and transcribed. All were asked to begin at any point in their lives, and to discuss only what they felt comfortable disclosing. A set of common questions were asked of all

participants, during or following the presentation of the life story as appropriate. These questions, adapted from Coleman, Ivani-Chalian and Robinson (1998), included: ‘Do you often think back over the whole of your life course?’, ‘What aspects stand out as particularly important?’ and ‘What do you think these aspects mean to you now in later life?’ However, questions were often altered according to context and timing, so that they did not detract from the story being told. Specific questions were asked during the interview in order to clarify information, refocus on the story and/or to prompt participants to provide more detail. In the main, participants were given the freedom to present a life story as they saw fit at the time, and were not impeded in doing this. All were asked whether they ‘feel their age’, a question that emerged as important and produced some interesting findings.

While there is considerable debate surrounding the theory and practice of narrative studies (see, for example, Bochner 2001), this report does not delve too deeply into the contested features of narrative theories. It seeks to describe the stories rather than subject them to extensive analysis, critique or speculation.

Nonetheless, a basic concept of narrative has been used to guide the research and the following discussion: as a form of cultural production mediating contemporary life (Gubrium & Holstein 2003) life stories can reveal qualities of the person that reach beyond appearances (Arendt 1958). As such, they are both culturally relevant and personally revealing. By distinguishing between the life-as-lived and the life-as-told, narrative entails not just revelation or relevance, but also retrospection (Arendt 1958; Speight 2011). Life stories are not, however, unmediated accounts of personal experience, but forms of social action, accounts that ‘help constitute our realities and modes of being’ (Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes 2010, p. 2). Thus, the critical point is not the veracity of the life story but rather, how one grasps ‘from the course of a life a certain kind of coherence’ and *creates meaning* (Speight 2011, p. 116).

3 Findings

Tell me your story

Life-story telling is a creative process. And it is a process that all participants had to work at. While there is a strong propensity for individuals to tell stories about their lives, and while some in this study were better storytellers than others, the life story did not appear to be a natural or simple process of recollection. Participants made important decisions in constructing and presenting their life stories. Deciding what to include and exclude could be challenging, as such decisions prioritised particular memories and experiences, defined the private and public persona of the individual and determined the overall coherence of the life story. Yet, it is these decisions (conscious or not) that determined the structure and content of the stories and thus the meaning conveyed (see, for example, Gubrium & Holstein 1998). As such, the content and composition of the life story reflects important changes over the participant’s life course, and may also, as Ruth and Kenyon (1996) point out, capture the complexities of later life experience and the construction of selfhood during this stage of life.

Most of the life stories in this study had a clear structure. Beginning with birth, participants moved through the life course chronologically, addressing in order early family life and childhood, education, family formation, work and finally later life. Such a representation provided a sense of order, an order that assists in the comprehension of life’s complexities, but one that is deceptive. At

first the order appeared linear and causal. However, in recounting life stories participants continually moved between the past and the present as though an internal dialogue between what was, what is and, for some, what will be, was taking place. Moreover, a chronological, ordered life story may be how participants thought the life story should be presented, rather than a true reflection of what the story entailed. This suggests two important qualities of life-story telling and the interview process in contemporary society: as Gubrium and Holstein (2003) argue, the interview is both the means by which we define who we are and the method through which experiences and a sense of self are represented.

Most participants chose to narrate their life stories from the beginning to the present. A few, however, preferred to begin their stories with current events and experiences. In these cases previous life events were woven into current concerns. A small number presented multiple stories in no particular order, reflecting different aspects of the life course. These distinct aspects were then organised into a coherent whole, with the storyteller identifying the links between the stories through the act of storytelling.

What became clear, as much from what was unsaid as from what was actually stated, was that individuals have a collection or stock of stories that can be drawn upon when *necessary* and where *appropriate*. To illuminate an aspect of one's life, a detailed story was often called for. For example when and where someone was born was often accompanied by a story, a necessary component to communicate the meaning of the event. One participant began her life story as follows: 'I grew up in the poor days ...' The simple statement suggests a considerable amount about this person. It sets the scene for a childhood experience characterised by poverty and disadvantage, and prefigures significant personal change later in life. It is thus all at once descriptive, meaningful and foretelling. Many participants made the point that they would not include certain events which were considered not *appropriate* to discuss in such a setting. Such stories were either kept private or shared only with loved ones, close relations or friends. Thus, the stories one tells depend on the setting and audience.

From the stories collected as part of this research it has been possible to discern three important observations:

- Prompting someone to tell their life story requires them to recount a series of inter-linked stories as appropriate and organise these so that they have an emotional logic and consistency, and are able to be understood by an external audience;
- 'Causality' (which helps to define the internal/external logic of a story or set of stories) and 'emotional cadence' (the way the stories resonate with the teller and listener) are both critical aspects of life stories (for detailed discussion of these elements see Speight 2011; Velleman 2003)
- Stories which are told at particular points in the overall narrative, and which illuminate basic facts such as when/where someone was born, ascribe meaning to events and experiences, and can capture how such meaning changes over the life course.

The following section discusses some of the themes that emerged from listening to the stories. They are in no particular order, nor are they an exhaustive list. Writing the report inevitably involved a process of selection and the use of excerpts to highlight particular messages and meanings of individual life stories.

A charmed life

The general statement I would make is I've led a charmed life. Unfortunate and distressing and painful things have happened, and there's been a lot of loss and grief, but here I am. And I don't know how it happened, but I'm grateful ... and the later stage of my life has been the emergence of this feeling of gratitude.

The notion of a lucky or charmed life was reflected by almost all of the participants in their life stories. Even for those who had experienced considerable loss or disappointment the idea of a charmed or lucky life was a resounding feature. In the main such a proposition was reached through the course of recounting one's life. In other cases, the notion emerged through direct questioning, which often then provoked a detailed story. Either way, its presence in stories from people of very different backgrounds suggests something remarkable. The idea can be qualified or defined in a number of ways.

The person quoted above was careful to distinguish between charm and luck (see Box 1). For her, living a charmed life referred to being endowed from birth with an inner resource to cope with life's ups and downs. She could not specify exactly what this resource was or how it worked, but she felt that meditation and her spiritual practice supplemented her inner strength. Her notion of being charmed, enabling her to deal with life's pains and disappointments, implied something quite different from luck which she associated with a lack of control. While she could not control various circumstances, she felt she could to some extent control her responses to them by hard work and determination. This was an important characteristic of her life experiences.

For some people, luck referred to having endured particular challenges and difficulties. One man aged in his mid 70s used the term 'lucky man' to describe his battle with alcoholism and a number of health concerns, including a series of strokes which affected his memory and coordination. Luck was used by a woman in her 60s to describe coming off the streets and being given a stable place to live. In both examples it was used to account for making it through hardship and disadvantage.

For others it was the luck of having good parents and a good upbringing. Asked whether she often thought back over her life, one woman in her 70s stated: 'Oh, all the time ... how lucky I was, how lucky we were ... to have such great parents'. Another woman felt blessed to have 'had parents with a stable marriage, and loving marriage'. Luck for another woman was related to privilege, from which stories about opportunity and civic engagement were told. This form of luck was formative rather than incidental, and could be thought to influence the entire life course.

In all cases the use of terms such as luck or fortune relates to feelings of control and agency. The luck of having good parents or being born at a particular time or place are aspects of life that no-one has any control over. Reflecting on one's luck brings to light aspects of the life course or previous life events that participants felt they could not control. Stating that something in the past was due to luck was often a foundation for reclaiming a sense of agency in the present. This, in turn, reveals the reflexive power of life stories.

Box 1**Miriam¹**

Miriam did not begin her life story from its beginning, but told a series of interlinked stories about significant life experiences. Starting with the present she talked about her feeling of gratitude. 'I've led a charmed life', she reflected, which meant for her that by virtue of a 'charm or spell' she was born with an inner resource that enabled her to cope with life's challenges, painful and distressing as they may have been. She was proud of her ability to cope and referred on a number of occasions to her 'spiritual practice', behaviours drawn mainly from Buddhism, which she described as transformative. Recalling her discovery of Buddhism during mid-life she stated: 'It sounded like something I had always known but forgotten ... I wasn't looking for it. It just bowled me over'.

Life for Miriam consisted of many such discoveries. She described the excitement of encountering algebra, geometry and French for the first time at high school, and the palpable 'moment of insight [and] joy' of a landmark discovery while doing her PhD thesis. She came to life while retelling such experiences.

Intermingled with such stories were others about loss and grief; for example she recalled being forced to leave a job she cherished. These were painful memories and she could not explain how she continued after such events. She did, however, find other avenues for creative output. At the same time she continued to draw inspiration from significant 'ah-ha' moments of insight, stating, 'I must be geared for that'. Indeed, many of Miriam's stories were about her search for understanding. She recalled reading the entire works of Shakespeare at an early age to discover the secrets to human interaction. And she also used well-known stories to capture personal experience. The Old Testament story of the righteous Hebrews being thrown into the flames was used to capture her experience of moving into residential care, and the hostile environment she encountered there.

Miriam proved a complex and resilient individual, able to work together the ups and downs of her life through storytelling in an intriguing way. She drew inspiration from her spiritual ideas and practices, particularly meditation, but avoided rigid definitions or a code of beliefs. For Miriam these beliefs and practices defied explanation. While they certainly gave an ever-present, supportive basis to her life, they could not be storied in the conventional sense. To do so was not only unnecessary but would have both distorted and truncated them.

She had been a very gifted person, but always she felt she struggled with people's feelings: 'One of the stories I tell myself in recent in years is maybe I've got a touch of Asperger's cos I really haven't a clue how people will respond and I can't read them'. However, she showed a propensity to help others, commenting that 'we are culturally conditioned to be useful', and displayed a yearning for meaningful interaction with people. Her reflections on later life were revealing. She felt that until mid-life she had been living with 'blinkers on' and living a life dictated by fear. She concluded her story by saying: 'I had no idea I'd been so frightened all my life'. For Miriam life would continue to be a series of lessons and insights into the human condition—her own and others.

¹ Not her real name

The notion of being lucky was often arrived at through thinking about those less fortunate. The same person who described himself as a 'lucky man' said: 'I look at some of the people here who are crippled and I think to myself, "What the hell have you got to complain about?"'. Another, aged in his 60s, said: 'I'm a lucky one. There are a lot of people around that I know that aren't so lucky'. An appreciation of what one has was heightened for one woman by realising that other people have 'got [it] worse off'. And for another woman the times spent supporting family in hospitals made her 'never feel so well, because there's so many sick people all around you'.

All in all, the fact of reaching later life appears the most common source for characterising life as charmed or lucky. To have 'made it' to older age in spite of various health, social and economic challenges is considered lucky; at the same time, to have been given economic, social and educational opportunities to assist life's journey is also a form of luck. Importantly, luck is used to give meaning to the complex set of circumstances that enabled one to reach later life. Indeed, many could not describe how they had endured particular life events. For some luck was used to describe an absence of agency, circumstances that had no discernible cause or were due to factors beyond one's control. Thus, one of the few participants to discuss bad luck stated in relation to an operation she was due to have: 'God, it'd just be my luck to get some infection ... But I suppose at my age anything can happen ...'

Health

Well I suppose you have to say health first. You do! Which sounds like an older person's thing, because you never used to think about it ... If you want to keep going you've got to keep well.

With age, health emerges as one of the most important qualities of later life. It appears to be the single factor that enables individuals to maintain those features that make life enjoyable and pleasurable. All rated health as number one. 'Your health is your wealth', said one woman, 'you mightn't have much money, but you've gotta have good health'. Another observed: 'Number one is health, and number two is wealth'.

Life experiences seem to compound the importance of health. This development is a reflection not simply of a person's own health, but of the health of those around them. In particular the health of children and loved ones shapes one's attitude to health and wellbeing. One woman told the story of her son's battle with cancer, describing it as traumatic—the 'hugest thing ever'. He survived through good medical care and bone marrow transplants from a sibling. While such an ordeal reinforced the importance of individual health it clearly had more profound implications, reflecting the importance of family, sacrifice and care. As this example illustrates, health is rarely viewed in isolation from other aspects of life, and clearly bears some relationship to choice, independence, agency and freedom. While this theme requires more research and thought, storytelling can reveal the links between health and other aspects of the life course.

The focus on health in later life may also reflect shifting priorities. One participant explained, 'When I was first married I would have said money because we were so desperately short of it', revealing how priorities changed over the life course and with changing financial circumstances. One man realised that it would only be when his health (the 'physical self') limited his activities that it would become a major concern.

For some, however, health (physical and mental), had been a persistent concern throughout life. Good health was always a priority for some participants. There was not a shift in priorities, but an

intensification of health issues at particular points of the life course. One woman interrupted her stories of childhood to talk about her health, saying, 'I'm sort of falling to pieces', before resuming the story of growing up. As for a number of others, health (particularly mental health) was a central, defining feature of the stories she told.

Changing times

I wouldn't like to be in your position ... bringing up children today.

A number of participants expressed similar sentiments about changing times: 'I'm glad I'm not bringing up children now, because there's so many intrusions', said one participant who had spent most of her working life in early childhood development and education. People could identify through life experience how times had changed, and some viewed such change as detrimental to family and personal life.

Social and cultural change over time was a theme that many participants drew on to highlight their own values. Family relations, connections, work, even manners had changed over the course of their lives. Reflection on change reinforced deeply ingrained values, established much earlier in life. 'I was brought up to respect people that were older' and 'I never forget manners' were among one woman's reflections on changes to family and the respect she had been taught to show older people.

A sense of change helped to define generational differences. As one participant noted, an eighteen-year-old working more than twelve hours a day is 'something you're not going to see in this day and age'. This man prided himself on having worked from a young age the necessary long hours and days to save for a house. Similarly, another saw in the younger generations of today an inability to save and value hard work, and what she felt was a propensity to take the easy way out and accumulate greater debts:

A lot of young people just have everything, they don't hold back and they just put it on the [credit] card. Whereas we saved ... we more or less followed what our parents did in that respect ... 'Never get yourself [in debt] ... no, never go spend over your head'. We listened to that, but today ...

While their parents had fostered values that participants still valued, they had also taught some what not to do. As one participant stated: 'My parenting skills weren't very sharp because, I mean, my mother wasn't a very good model for me to learn off, was she?'; and again, 'Because my mother wasn't as a good parent as she could've been'. She recounted stories about having to learn effective parenting skills. The recurring theme was parenting as love, and the love that children need to grow and develop. One of her main aims in life was to ensure that her daughter was always looked after.

Personal change is a recurrent theme in the act of storytelling. Indeed, significant change often provided the internal drive for the entire narrative. The woman who described growing up in the poor days was able to contrast the loss and pain of early years with how she felt at present: 'Life was very hard then but now I'm getting better at everything. I can do things and I've got more confidence in myself. I believe in myself ... I just sort of couldn't cope with things when I was young, but it's different now'. The personal change this woman experienced in later life provides the internal dynamic of the narrative, where notions of maturity, growth and knowledge come to the fore.

Another participant, a woman in her 70s, recounted the story of a one-to-one teaching experiment—‘an interaction I had never experienced in my life before’—while she was an academic. She articulated the meaning of this experience:

Up until then the word ‘feelings’ meant distress, and I suddenly discovered that feelings could mean something pleasurable or pleasant or validating or encouraging. I had no idea that the word feeling could refer to anything like that. Tells you what my life had (oh dear!) been like up till then. No wonder I’d kept having severe clinical depression ... And nobody ever taught me a better way to cope with it ... Nobody showed me that there are other ways of living your life or perceiving or interpreting or looking at your own responses ... I tell myself that story, do you see what I mean?

This person recounted many such moments or stories, wherein personal change and realisation was recollected with great force.

For others personal change was one of many considerations; it did not define life, but was recognised as playing an important role in its shape. One man stated: ‘I’ve learnt to be ... more compassionate to people’. This attitudinal change redefined his relationships with other people. Similar stories of change prompted another participant to reflect: ‘Before I came here [to the Brotherhood] I didn’t have a clue. I thought, you know, everybody’s got everything, but did I get a rude awakening ...’ For this woman such an awakening inspired her to help others less fortunate.

Others identified events that represented significant change. For one man, coming to Australia was a critical moment: ‘[My] childhood you could say, it was hand to mouth ... the circumstances changed and the life changed when I came to Australia’. Despite most of his family living overseas he considered Australia his home—the old country ‘is the old home’. For two Chinese-speaking women the Australian citizenship ceremony was a day both would never forget, and a sign that they considered themselves Australian and Australia to be their home. Subsequently, both recounted how they had recently purchased burial plots, a further sign that they had ‘put their roots down’.

Loss

Some of the things about my life would make your hair curl.

Loss was a recurrent theme in most of the life stories collected for this research. Some stated from the outset that they would not discuss what were intensely painful or personal memories of loss. Others omitted large sections of their life, particularly childhood or married life, and it was understood or intimated that these parts were too painful to recount.

Many openly discussed loss, however. Stories detailing the loss of a parent, a child, a partner or spouse or a friend were common and touching. They often formed the beginning or end of a meaningful story. One woman had lost both parents when she was six, a devastating experience that had remained with her for her entire life. The loss reinforced memories of a hard childhood, but nonetheless this was a story that worked towards a resolution and functioned as an important source of happiness in later life. She had been able to locate the unmarked graves of her parents and pay for the headstones: ‘I think it’s ... made me happy; they’ve got a nice home at the cemetery; they’re not homeless anymore’. One man’s loss of a close friend had precipitated a ‘massive nervous breakdown’, which was followed by further breakdowns and other health issues. In this case, however, the loss appeared to be unresolved—as raw as when it first occurred.

For one woman the loss of close friends and a son were represented as the ‘downs’ in life, traumatic events that she still struggled with. While claiming that she would never get over her son’s death—‘It’s always with me’—she construed loss and death as part of life and said: ‘By and large you just go on’. Balancing loss with the ups or ‘blessings’ of life, this person believed that she had ‘had a very good life’. Like most participants, despite experiencing significant pain and loss, she expressed a high level of wellbeing.

Clearly individuals deal with loss and grief in different ways, though it is abundantly clear through the stories that the losses (as well as the gains) accumulate with age. Integrating loss into one’s life in a meaningful way can be achieved through storytelling: it provides a way for individuals to accept, rationalise and deal with painful memories of loss. As one man noted: ‘It can’t be sunshine and roses every day’. The same man told the story of relatives fighting over his mother’s inheritance as she was being laid to rest, from which time he ceased all contact with that side of the family. Storytelling reinforced his own values and feelings regarding his mother and family.

The loss of a job or livelihood could also be devastating. One participant who had been dismissed with little notice from a job she loved recalled that the loss ‘came as a thunderbolt’. In a ‘physically depleted state’, she said, ‘I visualised at my feet a shattered mirror that was my self-image, because I had identified with my work to such an extent’. But, as the story goes, she refused to ‘reconstruct’ the shattered mirror, an ‘unreliable’ reflection of who she was, and at the time she deliberately ‘tried not to make a story to explain what had happened’. She then described a general malaise, from which she later emerged with the intent of finding something else to do. There was a strong sense, as she had stated earlier in the interview, that ‘You get up and you keep going’. And at the time searching for an explanation—the telling of a story—might have hindered her ability to move on. However, in later life, she was able to integrate this event into her life story.

Many had learnt to put bad experiences behind them. As one woman explained: ‘The way I cope with things if anything bad happens ... I put it behind me. I don’t think about it. I go forward and, you know, you sort of ... start all over again’. A somewhat similar approach was proposed by another participant, who claimed: ‘I don’t dwell on the past. The past is gone. You can’t turn around and say tomorrow I’ll change ... That’s it, it’s over’. As both told elaborate stories about their past lives, not dwelling on the past and putting bad experiences behind had a particular meaning. It did not preclude thinking about the past but rather referred to the notion that you cannot change the past: the best thing is to move on to start anew after a loss or setback. As another man stated: ‘I always try to look forward if I can’.

Beliefs and values

I reckon you gotta believe in something—there’s gotta be something out there ... there’s gotta be something. Too many wonderful things have happened to the world haven’t they? and then there’s been a lot of bad things.

Various beliefs and values were present in the stories collected in this study. Often a specific belief was clearly stated. As the participant quoted above stated: ‘I’m not afraid of dying. I believe in reincarnation. I’m a Catholic, but I believe in reincarnation’. Another participant expressed the importance of religious belief in terms of values: ‘I think it’s important for people to have something to believe in ... it gives you a set of values, you know. It’s a foundation for everything you do’. For this person such values were an important source of stability.

More often than not, beliefs and values operated more subtly, below the surface of significant life stories. Caring about people and the ability to say 'I'm sorry' were for one woman important values. These were not so much faith-based but derived from her interactions with people on a daily basis and from previous life experiences. Another participant, who classed religion as a 'load of rubbish', structured much of her stories around the theme of helping others, particularly those less fortunate. Her experience of hardship and suffering was used to teach and aid others. This participant also derided what she referred to as the 'false world'. While she never explained exactly what she meant by the term the 'real world', her stories concerned people's material and emotional needs, family, social connections and social harmony. As she saw it, 'The loyalties and respect is gone'; for her, fundamental values included care, respect, security and solidarity.

A sense of what really mattered in life prompted one man to claim: 'I am Muslim, but I mean the first priority [is] to be a complete human being first ... and second come[s] the faith'. Humanity was his principal concern, which meant being humble, honest and helping the poor. He spoke with disdain about the use of religion to motivate inhumane acts. He then recounted a detailed story of an encounter when he was twelve with an old man who read his palm and foresaw events that later came true. Describing this man as having 'perfect knowledge', he concluded the story as follows: 'I think that old man, he had some mystical knowledge ... and if you see him he looks very, very poor—the dress he was wearing ... was made from the cheapest cloth ... and I will never, ever forget that ... fellow'. The world of appearances could not be trusted; what seemed to matter for this man was the intrinsic value of someone or something.

Work

All the participants told stories about work. For some, work was primarily a necessity. One man had begun his working life at an early age, selling newspapers six days a week in order to buy school books and a uniform. Coming from a large family where money was tight, he felt 'duty-bound' to support himself. This instilled a particular value attached to money and hard work. Generally, the participants viewed work positively, as an activity enriching on its own or as a means to support other aspects of life, such as the home and family. And it did not have to be paid work: voluntary work was represented as equally rewarding and fulfilling, as was the work involved in raising children or maintaining a household. Those who considered themselves lucky enough to have worked in a field or job that they thoroughly enjoyed, spoke at length of their working years and of work as an integral part of their lives. One woman had worked for decades in early childhood education and provided detailed accounts of her teaching training, early postings and promotions. Through storytelling her working life merged with the voluntary positions she took on later in life, a reflection of her commitment to the work she did and to all children. She recounted the following story:

Oh, it's the children and the parents ... I've always loved them and I don't ever see the disability—little children don't ever see the disability. The only time ... it ever hit me was ... there's a kindergarten in [place] which has very, very disabled children and I had been going there all the year ... and knew the children ... We came to the Christmas party and the parents were there and do you know I drove down King Street with tears running down my face because I knew what those parents were coping with day in and day out and that really hit me.

For this woman work was much more than a job. It was a vital source of motivation, satisfaction and identity.

Interspersed throughout this person's accounts of work were stories about family responsibilities. Like many other woman she had to balance paid work with being a mother. One participant's career had ceased once she had children, while another had gone to part-time work. Retrospectively one man thought he had successfully balanced a successful career with family: 'I was pretty focused on making sure there was a fair delineation between work and home'. He contrasted this with his father, a 'workaholic', an 'extremely self-disciplined' person who often brought his work home. His father died early, which motivated this participant to retire early with sufficient resources to enjoy this time of his life.

For most participants, hard work had produced positive and enduring results. For one man, however hard work had resulted in hardship, when he suffered serious and permanent injuries from a fall at work. For another, hard work and commitment had not paid off at all: health issues and financial pressures caused him to lose his business, an event he still wrestled with and told stories about. His story of forced retirement was fundamentally different to those stories about planned or chosen retirements.

Giving back

Most participants expressed a desire to help others and give back to those who had helped them. 'We are culturally conditioned to be useful', stated one woman, who had discovered earlier in life the value of being able to help people who were not friends or family. For some the desire to give back stemmed from their own experience of misfortune. This was certainly the case for one woman, whose own experiences of hardship and homelessness motivated her to volunteer for the disadvantaged. She reflected on past joys gained from finding someone crisis accommodation or extending someone else's period to pay an electricity or gas bill. Another whose own life was characterised by similar hardships explained: 'I like to do a lot of things for the homeless people and people that have got [a] mental illness. I like to help them'. Two others, who had found themselves 'great beneficiaries of medical knowledge and advancement' in their son's battle with cancer, continued to donate to medical research.

For others a sense of privilege motivated voluntary work and public service. One woman said that, while she had only ever had one paid job, she could cite a 'great huge list of voluntary positions on committees to do with education, kindergartens, schools, auxiliaries [and] raising money for musical equipment'. She reflected that she could not stop herself from 'putting her hand up' to help out. For this person privilege and public service went together. She recalled the message her headmistress—'a very influential woman'—instilled in her while at school, that the advantages of wealth and education implied an obligation to serve others and the community (see Box 2).

Volunteering was also valued for the social contacts and interaction. As one woman, a volunteer in a Brotherhood store, stated: 'That's why I like being at the Brotherhood, I think. I like the communication and ... the people that you work with. And I love all the customers that come in and the different types, they fascinate me'. A similar sense of connection motivated another man to volunteer in a Brotherhood store. This person recognised the mutual benefits to be gained from helping others. Reflecting on the help he provided to a neighbour's son, he stated: 'It's good for me and good for him'. Whatever people's reasons for volunteering it was the idea of making a contribution that mattered. That one's life and experiences could make a difference to someone else was important, and helped compensate for those aspects of life (especially poor health and disadvantage) people felt they had little control over.

Box 2

Jennifer²

Jennifer claimed to have inherited her gift as a story-teller from her father. She began at the beginning of her life, weaving different stories together to create a comprehensive picture. While her parents did not have much money she always felt privileged. The sense of privilege established during her schooldays was motivation to give back and she boasted a long list of voluntary positions related to music, education and fund-raising. She recalled particular moments of insight. At the age of 12, while watching Menzies' 1961 election speech with her grandparents, she was struck by a sense of 'feeling so grown up'. Her 'world broadened out so much' upon entering university and studying arts, and while reading Patrick White's *The Riders in the Chariot* she was again struck by the feeling that 'this is truly grown-up stuff'. While she described her parents as 'reasonably authoritarian' she recalled a strong sense of freedom in early life, particularly while at university.

At university Jennifer met her husband-to-be and fell pregnant at the age of 22. As a result she was dismissed from her first job as a teacher. They moved in together and started a family. 'Parenting', she said, 'is one of the most important things to you do', and she saw family as the most important aspect of her life. She described herself as 'innately conservative' and her life as fairly 'predictable', yet she displayed a strong belief in equality, especially in relation to education, and had to deal with an array of life's challenges. She openly shared the difficulties of raising teenage boys and detailed her son's successful battle with cancer.

Jennifer loved life and sought to squeeze as much out of it as possible. She relished her role as a grandmother, the opportunity to travel and the freedom to pursue her love of art, music and literature. 'I love being older', she said, 'because I've begun to make sense of my own experience'. She felt that age had brought with it wisdom, calm and tranquillity. However, Jennifer did not feel old: 'I don't actually feel inside any different to what I did when I was 17. I'm the same person ... I can't imagine what being old inside is like'. At first this seemed like a contradiction but perhaps what Jennifer was talking about was the ability to realise who she had been all along. That it took age, experience and reflection to attain such knowledge was for Jennifer truly meaningful.

Grandparenting

Some participants used stories to counterpose the difficult role of parenting—'one of the most important things you do'—with the joys of grandparenting. Indeed, many explained grandparenting by contrasting it with parenting. Most prominent was the idea that as grandparents they could look upon children differently to parents. As one man stated, the difference was about 'being able to be slightly objective and enjoying the grandchild for' their individuality. 'Grandchildren', another participant stated, 'are utterly perfect'. Many saw their role as grandparents as being able to expose grandchildren to things that parents could not. One woman told how her grandchildren were required to leave phones, computers and electronic games at her door to make way for other activities such as outdoor play which she considered important.

Most participants cherished their contact with grandchildren. For one woman, being a grandparent came with the realisation that she had wisdom: she could understand children on different terms.

² Not her real name

Again a comparison between parenting and grandparenting is used here to discern meaning in her role as a grandmother. She could see clearly what she was not capable of seeing as a parent.

Grandparenting came with significant responsibilities, however. For some it was important to provide care when necessary: stories about child-minding, picking up and dropping off grandchildren at school and providing personal and financial support were common. Grandparenting also involved clear boundaries. As one woman stated: 'As grandparents we would never interfere or say anything that wasn't supportive'. To reinforce the point she recounted an instance where her mother-in-law had interfered and undermined her own parenting skills. Another woman stated that it was not her role to interfere, observing that parents do not always listen anyway.

Only one participant had become a great-grandparent. She commented: 'We're now great-grandparents, but that's a lovely stage because ... you're the next generation, so all you do is the cuddles and nice things'. As this person suggested, the role of the great-grandparent is different to that of the grandparent; it did not come with the responsibilities she associated with her earlier role as grandparent. The incidence of four or five generations living at the same time is unprecedented. So such stories may be important for establishing the social and cultural roles of great-grandparents.

I don't feel old

No, I don't feel old. I'm 70 next month but I don't feel it, you know what I mean. I'm running around like a kid.

Most participants commented during the discussions of the life stories that they did not feel old. However, the age one feels was qualified in a number of ways: 'Sometimes I feel 150', said one woman in her sixties: 'We were talking about that today at lunch. My girlfriend's 80 and she's incredible, so I really think it's a state of mind. I really do. You know, sometimes when I don't feel 100 per cent, I feel 200'. Another participant who said that he did not feel old inside was quick to point out the physical constraints that age brings on: 'When you are young you can lift 40 kilos like nothing ... but now if you lift 10 or 20 kilos your muscles and body ache, you feel pain and stiffness. So time is very cruel'. From a physical, functional perspective, ageing brings about changes that are not always welcome.

Many people discussed 'mirror moments', those points in time where one glimpses a reflection or view of oneself as old. It was a realisation that most dealt with humorously. One woman recalled saying to her sister, 'When I get out of the bed and look in the mirror ... I see Mum,' to which her sister replied, 'Yeah, she lives at my house too'. Another participant in her 80s said much the same:

I said something to one of the girls one day ... She was here and I said, 'Goodness, I'm muddling round like a little old lady'. And she looked at me and she said, 'Mother, you are a little old lady'. Cos I've lost two and a half inches in height, and I'm grey-haired and I was a little old lady.

Yet an older appearance did not mean one felt old inside. One woman in her 60s explained: 'I don't actually feel inside any different to what I did when I was 17. I'm the same person'. Likewise, another woman in her 80s stated: 'But I don't feel old inside. I feel I can still do the things ... I don't feel any different to when I was 35 really'.

At the same time, many participants commented on significant changes that came with age. A sense of self-realisation and self-understanding was palpable for one participant: 'I like being older,' she said, 'I know this, I understand this. I understand why I'm thinking this ... because I've

begun to make sense of my own experience'. Another participant referred not to personal traits but to specific social aspects of age and experience which had allowed her to see with greater clarity: 'I like being as old as I am. I'm sort of seeing the things in life ... I want to change'.

Interestingly, the stories told about how old one feels counteract representations of ageing as decline. This area of later life narratives—the ability to counter stereotypes and popular perceptions of ageing—will be explored in future studies. And while participants acknowledged that factors such as health and abilities like vision and hearing may decline with age, there is a need to explore the complex relationship between functional decline and inner growth. Whether declines in health and physical ability are accompanied by inner growth, maturity and wisdom is a question that further research into storytelling may illuminate.

Death

I love to hear of people going in their sleep. It would be ideal, wouldn't it?

Most of the participants did not shy away from the issue of death, either their own or someone else's. Indeed, many made the point that they were not afraid of dying. As one participant stated: 'For us we are not afraid of death, because death is a definite for humankind. So we are happy to face the reality and not [be] scared'. Another stated that he had 'no great fear of dying'.

On the other hand, the reality of death was a fact that some tried not to think about too much. One woman recounted a story about her mother just before she died:

[O]ne day I went up to the retirement village and she [Mum] didn't know I was coming and I went looking for her and here she was, just walking, hanging on to the wall to get back to her unit. And I went up and helped and she said ... 'I think I've had it' ... And that was it, she was dead, you know, two weeks later. And so I don't try to think about it. I just think it's a natural progression and it just happens.

As this touching story reveals, the death of someone else—usually a loved one—was how participants expressed their attitude towards death; talking about one's own death was not present in the stories collected in this research. It seems a deeply private matter that the oft-mentioned comment, 'I'm not afraid of dying', does not manage to capture.

Most participants concentrated on living, all making the claim that they still had many more years to live. As one woman in her 60s put it: 'Who cares if I got grey hair. I still got plenty of life in me yet, you know. I hope to live till I'm 80 or 85—don't worry me'. Another stated: 'Well, people can live a long time now ... I just wanna live as long as I can, to 100 or even more if I can ... cos, you know, I enjoy living'. And 'I'm not ready to go yet—I've got too much to do', stated another. Like many others, this woman found during later life a propensity to set goals to live for: a grandchild's birthday, another significant family event or an annual celebration. The setting of such goals represents a realisation that time is limited and/or precious.

4 Conclusions

This brief report has presented themes from the life stories collected for this research. The themes do not constitute an exhaustive list, but nonetheless provide a revealing collection of experiences and events that older adults consider important. Some themes, such as belief and health, are well-established and extensively researched features of later life experience. Others, such as the lucky or charmed life and the age that you feel, provide different frameworks for older adults to make sense of experience.

This study has also identified what are termed counter-narratives, narratives that tell a different story about older age than what we are used to. Included here are stories about feeling young inside and some that reflect development and personal change in later life. Such stories counter the stereotype of inactive older people ruminating about the past. They suggest also that older people think about the future—their own and that of others.

This report prompts additional research questions and areas of further inquiry. There is certainly a need to explore how the meanings attached to health and belief in later life are contingent on other factors, particularly those relating to family, culture and the social environment. The fact that health or belief were rarely discussed in isolation, but were connected to other elements of life through storytelling, suggests that the approach developed in this study may have broader implications than first thought.

Other aspects of life stories requiring further research, such as the invention of stories and the role of myth, may provide additional insights into the meaning of life course experiences and personal changes that take place in later life. While identity and selfhood have been touched on this report, closer attention is required to draw out their significance in relation to storytelling. There is also the option of exploring how life stories represent the relationship one has with macro-forces, such as systems of governance, authority and ideology.

Finally, all of the participants welcomed (some even relished) the opportunity to tell their stories. All, it is felt, presented their stories openly and honestly (sometimes brutally so). A Chinese-speaking woman stated at the completion of her story:

I want to supplement one word: what we said are true words; what we said is from the bottom of our hearts.

Such a statement, according to the interpreter, was significant: it suggested that this person had not always felt comfortable to speak from the heart. In the appropriate setting when people tell stories about themselves there is an amazing propensity to be honest. There is a need to tap into this human quality, not simply to find out what it's like to grow older, but to satisfy people's urge to tell their story and validate who they are.

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