

Social Policy Working Paper **no. 17**

Meanings of a long life

Cultural, social and historical perspectives

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April 2013

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PUBLIC
POLICY



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Published by

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Fitzroy Vic. 3065
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Phone: (03) 9483 1183
www.bsl.org.au

and

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www.public-policy.unimelb.edu.au

ISSN 1832-4339
ISBN 978-1-921623-39-4

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Preface

This paper is part of a series that attempts to re-position the perceptions and contributions of older people in contemporary Australian society. The world is undergoing a profound demographic shift, with almost every nation state experiencing population ageing on a scale that is unprecedented. This means that we have to search for new models by which to grow old and challenge stereotypes that there is only one acceptable way of doing so. The dominant view of adult ageing has recently changed from one based on dependency to one based on economic contribution. However if we are to successfully move to a new cultural environment—one that accepts age diversity and eschews age prejudice—we must consider a wide range of ways in which older adults can make a contribution. It would not be too much to say that we currently experience a poverty of meaning in our understanding of adult ageing; and it is this problem that the current series seeks to address.

The first paper in this series (Fredvang & Biggs 2012) addressed the question of the rights of older persons; this second examines the diversity of roles that have been open to older adults throughout history, belief systems and cultures. *Meanings of a long life* is a starting point for a diversity bank of contributions and forms of engagement that older people can interrogate, adopt or reject. The point is that we need to loosen up our current understandings of old age and embrace adaptation to a new demographic environment.

Meanings of a long life, then, sets the scene by examining the existing models and alternatives available to older adults and looking at the sweep of historical and cultural tradition. This will form the basis of an empirical study that will examine the reactions of older adults themselves and alternative understandings that might emerge.

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1 Introduction

This project initially set out to capture the diversity of the ageing experience. It aimed to identify the different ways older adults have established meaning and made sense of their lives. Inevitably, such a project is selective and incomplete in scope and interpretation. As a first step we have collated a number of models for growing old. It has been done in a relatively straightforward fashion: determining those factors—age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and religion—used to define diversity and establishing a broad set of categories from which discrete models of later life could then be built. It was also assumed that an examination of different social, cultural and historical perspectives of ageing would allow a common set of values on later life to emerge. This required a substantial re-think of what an increasingly diverse and ageing population means socially and culturally. As such, the following study intends to make a small but valuable contribution to what should become an area of interest in ageing research and policy.

Ageing policy, ageing identities and intergenerational relations are, according to Biggs and Kimberley (2013), ‘simultaneously in flux’. As demographics change there is a level of uncertainty on what ageing means now and will mean in the future. There is thus a need to widen the frame of reference in which ageing policy and research is developed. This involves an exploration of different meanings of later life and the ageing experience, an area that should be of interest to those concerned with ageing policies, aged care service providers and older adults in general.

Policy

While diversity of the ageing experience may be given greater emphasis in some circles, there is an equally strong tendency to render ageing more manageable and controlled (Estes, Biggs & Phillipson 2009; see also Daatland & Biggs 2006). The dominance of the active and productive ageing discourses, while initially constructed around multiple possibilities, has worked to narrow sources of personal meaning in later life. According to Moolaert and Biggs (2012) ‘the original flexibility of mature identity’ may have been a missed opportunity: tracing the ‘genealogy’ of active and productive ageing, the authors show how notions of ‘flexibility’ and ‘opportunity’ quickly morphed during the 1990s and 2000s into a new rigidity, legitimising certain pathways of growing old. The current international policy environment promotes work and productive activities over and above other sources of meaning such as religion, spirituality and existential concerns.

A similar trend is observed in Australia. Biggs and Kimberley (2013) argue that Australian ageing policy obscures rather than promotes ‘diversity in the experience of growing older’ and represents a risky mismatch between policy initiatives and personal changes in later life. They identify an overwhelming policy preference for finding ways to increase the workforce participation of older adults, wherein ‘[o]ther forms of personal development are not seriously addressed’. This entails continuing work and productivity as the norm for older adults in Australia.

There are, no doubt, strong economic and political imperatives at work. According to the Australian Government’s Intergenerational Report (2010), ageing looms along with climate change as the most pressing challenge for government and society. In attempting to tackle the projected economic and fiscal challenges of ageing, Australia has, in line with international policy trends, adopted work and work-related activities as the principal solution to the ‘problem’ of ageing (Biggs & Kimberley 2013).

The use of demographic data to highlight the growing number of older adults and the ageing of the population in general tends to emphasise the problems involved—increasing rates of dependency, intergenerational conflict and various inequities—and effectively stifles discussion on the many opportunities presented. Indeed, when demographic material is discussed in the context of ‘healthcare, pensions, social security, retirement, taxes and intergenerational relations’ it generates a sense of alarm and suggests a set of problems that require political action (Katz 1992, p. 204). The dominant models of ageing—‘productive’ and ‘active’—have developed as solutions to the perceived problems of population ageing rather than as meaningful opportunities for older adults. By remaining productive older adults can continue to make an economic contribution and thus draw less on retirement incomes, pensions and government services; likewise the predicted burden of an ageing population on the healthcare system can be reduced through ‘seniors’ remaining active and thus healthy for a longer period of time.

Less emphasis is given to the cultural aspects of demographic change, which may be just as pronounced. Exploring the various social and cultural values attached to late life engenders a different perspective. In this light, population figures and predictions continue to play a role but support a focused shift towards understanding what ageing means to this growing segment of the population. Burden and dependency become less effective as conceptual tools than notions of meaning, value and purpose.

There is thus a pressing need to identify alternative models of ageing and later life experience— notions that receive less attention in current debates. This requires a move away from popular stereotypes of older age and accepted age-based categories to challenge the ‘productive’ and ‘active’ models of ageing. It also entails a rejection of conclusive, all-encompassing statements on what it means to grow old, relying instead on a tapestry of meanings and effectively building a body of evidence for social, cultural and political change.

As this paper argues, ageing is best understood as ‘a complex of many different processes’ (Baars 1997, p. 284). As such, it defies neat explanations. To study the meaning of older age is to invoke a ‘multifaceted corpus of conceptions, beliefs and attitudes’ and a range of ‘competing explanatory models’ (Hazan 1994, pp. 3–5). And, while the search for meaning may be a fundamental human concern (Frankl 1963), it is often expressed in contradictory, fragmented and confusing ways. ‘The meanings of aging and old age are scattered, plural, contradictory, and enigmatic’, according to Katz (1996, p. 1), and thus can furnish ‘the human imagination with limitless opportunities’ for its expression. This seems to hold true in different settings but is particularly pertinent in contemporary constructions of later life.

While accepting uncertainty and ambiguity may not be a strength of public policy, there should at least be greater recognition in current debate of the diverse meanings of the ageing experience. The premise of this paper—that there is more to life than work—should stimulate much-needed debate on the possibilities of ageing rather than its problems.

Meaning

Understanding the multiple meanings of later life counteracts policy frameworks and ageing norms which promote uniformity. Many believe, however, that later life suffers from a crisis of meaning. Polivka (2000), for instance, suggests that postmodernism has stripped old age of its intrinsic value; Baars (1997) argues that there is little to inspire older adults in current narratives of ageing; and Cole (1992) posits ageing as impoverished of meaning—‘later life floats in a cultural limbo ... a

season in search of its purposes'. With regard to the academic disciplines, Cole (1992) further contends that gerontology, and with it other human and social sciences, lacks the necessary language for addressing the moral and social questions that characterise later life. This in part matches Phillipson's (1998) view that modern life undermines the cultural identity of older adults.

By examining a range of life-course models, and determining the meaning accorded to older age within each, this study aims to broaden the scope or 'horizon' within which ageing and old age is understood. It represents a sort of 'loosening up'¹ (Biggs 1999a) of ageing categories and frameworks to construct a *bricolage* (Cole 1992; Lévi-Strauss 1966; Myerhoff 1979) or tapestry of different meanings to age by. While this may suggest what Gilleard and Higgs (2005) describe as cultural habits or 'habitus'—different values and 'dispositions that structure and generate individual practices'—the models denote values and ideals more meaningful than consumer or lifestyle choices.

The different models discussed are essentially cultural ideals. As Cole (1992) states:

[Through] myth, metaphor, and other forms of symbolic language, such ideals impart meaning to old age and convey the dominant social opportunities available to people as they chart their individual paths into late life. An ideal old age legitimizes roles and norms appropriate to the last stage of life, providing sanctions and incentives for living with the flow of time (p. xxviii).

A complex society may accommodate competing cultural ideals of the meaning of later life and older age. This study promotes the idea that there are many ways—social, cultural and historical—to understand the meanings assigned to later life.

The study was originally designed to identify the social roles and contributions of older adults. As Hazan (1988) notes, however, there is often a contradiction between social position and cultural values. Some of the models discussed below contain cultural ideals that express a reverence and veneration for older adults but do not provide equivalent social opportunities. This is particularly the case with the dominant models of ageing, which value independence and agency for ageing individuals yet seek to manage and stifle the ageing experience. Through an examination of different ageing models, this study attempts to unravel some of the socio-cultural complexities of ageing.

This study does not rank different constructions of ageing but rather compares them in order to establish distinctive values of later life. At the same time it suggests that different models may have more in common than previously thought; that there is potentially a continuous meeting of ideals, amalgamated to form new and exciting models of social meaning; and that individuals may draw on multiple meanings to make sense of later life. Most importantly the following study does not provide a definitive conclusion on what growing old means. In essence it is exploratory rather than schematic: real, sustaining and substantial meanings of older age are perhaps best understood not through a reliance on a one-size-fits-all explanation of late life experience, but instead through the diversity and plurality of multiple, often contested, meanings.

¹ 'Loosening up', which was initially employed to describe the 'blurring' of the life course from an individual, psycho-social standpoint (see Biggs 1999a), is here applied to social and cultural environments to mean the freeing-up of old-age categories, values and explanatory frameworks to describe 'the possibility of their re-combination in different forms' (p. 211), or else their entire re-constitution.

Rejecting a one-size-fits-all model of ageing to recognise multiple meanings has various policy and workforce implications. Government policy, according to Biggs (2001), permits certain activities and prohibits others by providing a social framework within which ageing identities are expressed and particular issues are validated. For example ‘active ageing’—a key ingredient in the Commonwealth’s current Ageing Agenda—normalises behaviours such as exercise and promotes continued productivity (Australian Government 2012). Ranzijn (2010) found through cultural inquiry, however, that the healthy and active ageing paradigms with their bio-medical and individual focus do not correspond with the aspirations of older Indigenous Australians. On closer inspection this may also be the case for other groups. There is a need to explore the variety of options open to older adults and move away from the idea that later life is about either activity or dependency.

Alternative models provide a greater understanding of what it means to grow old in contemporary Australia. This does not mean dismissing the benefits that flow from health-focused or ‘active ageing’ policies, such as improved care and better housing, but it does involve realising that there are multiple factors that contribute to a meaningful life. A focus on different cultural frames of understanding may provide a fuller sense of meaning in later life than is the case in policies centred on the economics of ageing. The cultural contribution and social capital of older adults can be shown to be important and of value to the wider community, countering stereotypes that support narrow policy priorities and shape societal attitudes towards older adults.

To do this the study will draw on a wide range of social, cultural and historical sources to discuss a number of life-course models from which multiple meanings of later life will be identified. It recognises, however, that there are limits. It does not include intergenerational models or the portrayal of older adults in the media, though it does identify some of the more prominent life-course models of ageing according to the literature. Most of the models discussed in this study are relevant to the diverse society of Australia. However, readers will no doubt identify where additional models, information and debate are needed. If this occurs then the paper has achieved its aims.

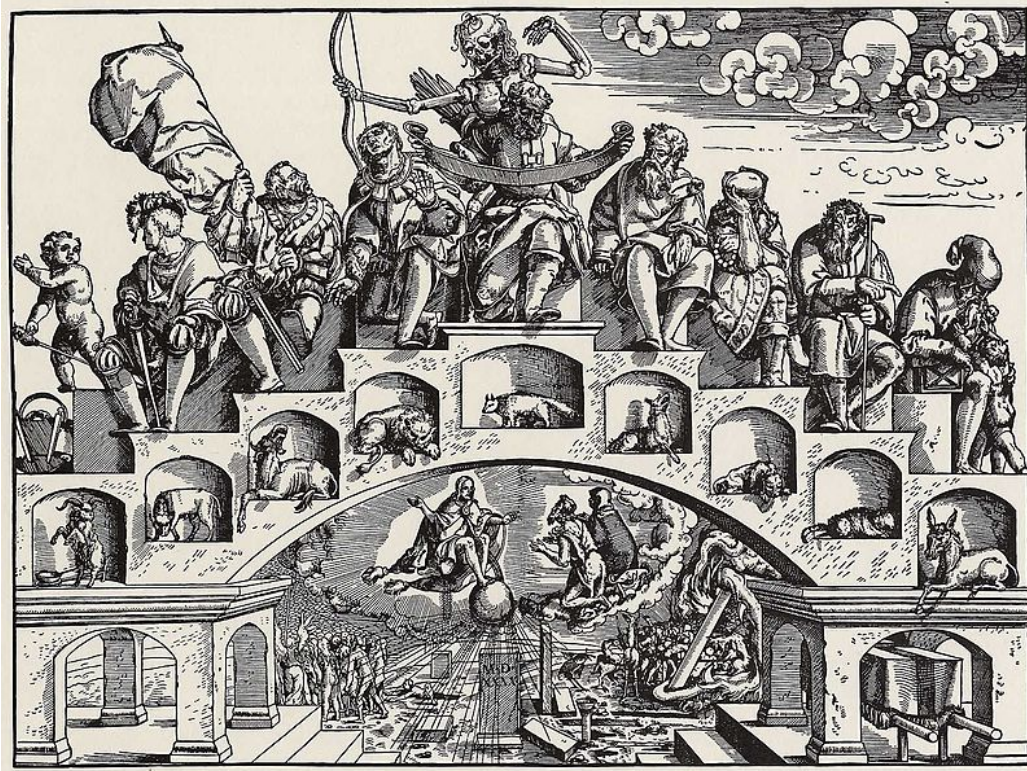
2 Tracing the modern life course

The models of ageing discussed throughout are primarily based on the life course or life cycle. Both divide the lifespan into stages, passages and/or transitions, which are themselves shaped by specific social and cultural ideals. As cultural constructions the models both reflect and determine how we think about the life course. They have a long history and have fulfilled various practical and symbolic functions. Menchi (2001) provides a summary of the most prominent periodisations of life from the classical period to the sixteenth century (Table 1).

Table 1: Life stage models (based on Menchi 2001)

Type	Description
A. 3-stage	Youth, maturity and old age—corresponding to the triadic arc of the sun: rising, zenith and setting Propagated by Aristotle, and influencing Christianity during the Middle Ages
B. 4-stage	Based on the Pythagorean tetrad as an organising principle: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • four elements of the cosmos and four primary qualities • four humours of the body—link to four ages of man (Hippocratic and Galenic in origin) • four seasons of the year (and four winds)—link to four ages of man (Ptolemaic in origin) • established harmony between man and the universe.
C. 6-stage	Based on Augustine’s interpretation of the book of Genesis: links the six days of creation with the six ages of human history with the six phases of human life.
D. 7-stage	Based on the Pythagorean concept of the number of seven—the <i>numerus perfectus</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seven spheres of the universe • seven celestial bodies • seven parts of the human body. <p>According to Hippocrates the number seven regulates ‘the natural rhythm of growth and decay; the life cycle is composed of seven 10-year stages (or seven seven-year stages).</p>
E. 10-stage	Life divided into ten periods of ten years each; Solon’s variation is ten periods of seven-years. Popular in Europe during the Middle Ages, until the fifteenth century this periodisation remained linked to the wheel of life; from the sixteenth century the ladder of life became more widespread.

From the sixteenth century, the steps or ladder of life ‘became the most widely diffused motif in iconographic representation of the ages’ (Menchi 2001). Jörg Breu the Younger’s representation of the steps life course (see illustration) is perhaps the most well-known: life is depicted as a series of steps, each representing a different age and accompanied by a different animal.



Jörg Breu's representation of the steps life course (woodcut 1540)

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Life appears to peak at the fifth stage; in the sixth stage the man looks back on previous stages; in the seventh contemplation takes hold; by the eighth the walking stick has replaced the sword of earlier stages and the man points towards the inevitable final stage; in the last stage the old man, close to death, has a child at his feet, presenting some sense of the cycle of life and death. Yet death is ever-present and looms above the bridge of life, and is poised ready to unleash an arrow even onto the ascending steps; in the right corner clouds are depicted, indicating the winter of life, while under the bridge of life judgement await the departed with John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary praying for the souls of the faithful (Cole 1992). Compared with the three-stage division (youth, maturity and old age), in this representation the differences between life stages are less pronounced. This, Menchi notes, 'mitigates the horrors of old age' (2001, p. 55) but similarly creates the sense of a long and orderly life course.

This scheme, according to Menchi (2001), was more widely applied to the various stages of the female life course. In such illustrations women are linked closely to the domestic sphere, with an emphasis on home duties and child-rearing. The emergence of depictions of the life cycle of couples further reinforced women's domestic roles. Yet the rise and decline of life remains the same, with corresponding images used to represent the spring (youth) and winter (old age) of life.

The proliferation of the steps of life from the sixteenth century onwards indicates also the beginnings of the modern life course. As Cole (1992) states, the rising and falling staircase image

was able to capture the complex message of the ages of life, which juxtaposed the swiftness of time and the power of death with the wish for an orderly, long, productive life ... [It] attempted to span the uncertainty and helplessness of life. It depicted a developing middle-class struggle for success, as well as its fear of falling into social decline and eternal punishment (p. 25).

According to Menchi, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and continuing for much of the nineteenth, these representations of the life course ‘served the function of moral instruction in a protoindustrial and bourgeois mode’ (p. 49). Cole (1992) states further:

By depicting the appropriate appearance and behavior for each age of life, the motif taught that *each* age had its necessary place in the order of things. To submit to the physical exigencies of the aging process was to acquiesce in divine purpose. Thus the motif attempted to restore or create order, and especially *religious* order, by focusing on a newly imagined course of life. (p. 28)

A similar trajectory of the rise and fall of life is represented in *The life and age of man/woman* and *Stages of a man's/woman's life from the cradle to the grave*, published by James Baillie in 1848. The verse accompanying each stage presents a moral message and advice on what each transition entails and means. The same animals represent different life stages for the man, but the woman's life is characterised by a different set of images and symbols, which suggest particular gendered values. The woman's accepted behaviour is constructed around her domestic duties, whereas the man is shown to have a number of public responsibilities, such as military service. Only in his seventies and eighties is the man's ‘proper’ place in the home. Moreover, ageing for the man is primarily a process of physical decline, which leads to withdrawal from the public realm and into the home. In contrast, ageing for the woman in her seventies is ideally graceful; in her eighties, however, ‘second childhood loosens all her tongue’ and by her nineties she has become a ‘useless cumberer’. The differences reveal gendered qualities of ageing and death.



The life and age of man and woman (hand-coloured prints published by James Baillie 1848)

Source: Wikimedia Commons

The steps portray life as a rise, a peak and an inevitable decline towards death. The notion of decline in later life gains traction through vivid visual representation. According to Cole (1992), this type of representation—life according to stages and steps—dominated popular imagination for centuries but mainly functioned for the emerging middle class. He makes the point, however, that the cultural ideal of a ‘long, orderly and secure’ life would not become a social and demographic reality for large numbers of older adults until the twentieth century (Cole 1992).

The institutionalisation of the modern life course, partly achieved through advances in science, medicine and technology, helped to transform early visions of a ‘long, orderly and secure’ life into reality. The process of modernisation, which incorporates important economic and political developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the principal means by which the institutionalised life course is explained. A seminal article by Kohli (1986) traced the emergence of the formal life course concept, with its function and value driven by a need to resolve the structural

problems that emerged as a result of the transition from a household economy to one of free, contract-driven labour. Similarly, Chudacoff (1989) argued that the establishment of chronological age as an organising principle from the mid to late-nineteenth century onwards was essential for 'ordering and understanding modern life'. Kohli established five propositions of the institutionalised life course: temporalisation; chronologisation; individualisation; the structure and system of work preparation, activity and retirement; and a pattern of social rules (Kohli 1987, 2007). In terms of work and productivity the life course was divided into three distinct phases of preparation, activity and retirement. As a result old age (defined by retirement) became a distinct life stage in a framework centred on individual productivity.

Philosophical inquiry adds weight to the notion of later life as a distinct stage of the life course; however, existential concerns rather than productivity are the focus. The philosopher Thomas Rentsch (1997, p. 270) states: ageing is 'a communicative, self-reflective process forming a unique totality, a forming that is essentially highlighted by a change of view towards a meaningful and enduring life'; and in later life the search for meaning is intensified, the principal task being to become truly oneself. Such an approach rests securely on classical and humanist philosophies and resonates in prominent psycho-social models of later life. Carl Jung expressed a similar view through the notion of a 'quest for self' during the second half of life, as did Erik Erikson in terms of the goal of 'ego-integrity' in old age. Other examples of meaning and purpose in later life that do not centre on work are Kaufman's (1986) concept of the 'ageless self', Tornstam's (1997) notion of 'gerotranscendence' and a host of religious frameworks.

Meaning conceived as the 'product of temporality' puts older adults in a unique position to view and make sense of the lived life (Manheimer 1999/2000, p. 17). According to George (1998, p. 147), 'Late life is ideally suited to the expression of authentic attitudes and behaviours'. Indeed, changes affecting the older self are well established. In a study of language and cognition Dittmann-Kohli (1990) revealed a redefinition of the meaning of self and existence during later life. Moulart and Biggs (2012, p. 15) argue along similar lines and suggest that older adults rebalance the self by 'letting go of certain dimensions of life and investing in others'. The process of redefinition and rebalancing is also reflected in cross-cultural settings. According to the Hindu life cycle, later life may involve a focus on spiritual dimensions to generate what Mines (1981, p. 21) refers to as 'vital autonomy in older age'. That there is something distinctly meaningful about later life is reflected to varying degrees in all of the models discussed in this study.

There are, nonetheless, indications that the fixed structure of the life course is no longer tenable. The growth in the number of older adults has been linked to changing economic conditions and labour dynamics: older adults are encouraged to work longer or take on second careers to lessen their impact on the economy, effectively undermining or adjusting the set age of retirement. Similarly, a stretching of the average life course may mean extended working years, while the blurring of life-course stages (Biggs 1999a) and the demarcation of old age into different categories (such as the third and fourth ages; the young-old, old and old-old) also denote significant cultural and social change. Older adults are living longer and in ever greater numbers, which for Ronald Blythe (1979, p. 22) could mean that 'people may need to learn how to be aged as they once had to learn to be adults'. This is taking place in an increasingly fluid and disparate social world (Giddens 1991), which may as Biggs (1999a, 2005) argues challenge the authentic self of later life. There are also tensions emerging: Kohli (2007) identifies the tension between the standardised life-course program and individualisation and biographisation; Biggs (1999a) reveals tensions between ageism and consumerism, as evident in both increasing restriction and increasing choice. Dannefer and Uhlenberg (1998) argue along similar lines, positing that while there is more choice for older

adults, there is also more conformity. These paradoxes prompt a pressing need to understand how demographic developments may facilitate cultural change, and how growing diversity may underwrite different pathways in later life.

3 Anthropological models of ageing

Anthropologists have constructed a number of models for understanding the ageing experience across diverse social and cultural settings. Many have been constructed to test gerontological theories, while in recent times a kind of gero-anthropology has emerged. Earlier anthropological theories suggested universal principles of ageing, which were supported by extensive cross-cultural research. Simmons in *The role of the aged in primitive society* (1945) and subsequent articles (1952, 1962) suggested that the status of older adults decreased as a result of modernisation. In 1952 he stated:

while modern civilization has greatly progressed in the promise of longer life for larger proportions of the population, it has disrupted many of the time-tested adaptations of the aged, and perhaps even regressed in its solution of the problem of successful aging (p. 52).

Simmons was essentially critiquing the treatment of older adults in modern society. Cowgill and Holmes (1972) argued along similar lines: a fixed and higher status is accorded to older adults in preliterate societies; in modern societies the opposite holds true. They also argued that in preliterate societies individuals are classed as 'old' at an earlier point in the life course than is the case in modern societies.

However, the theory that the status of older people declined with changes to the family system brought about by modernisation and Westernisation has been criticised for its linear and uniform approach to social development (see, for example, Aboderin 2004; Cohen 1994). Current anthropological evidence suggests that ambivalence and ambiguity beset old age in a range of cultural settings, not only in modern and/or literate societies. The modernisation thesis also tended to romanticise old age in traditional societies, suggesting further that the status of older adults was somewhat static. On the basis of the scholarly evidence, Aboderin has constructed two contrasting models, which detail: (1) the support provided to older adults in traditional societies and (2) the causes for decline in family support according to the modernisation theory.

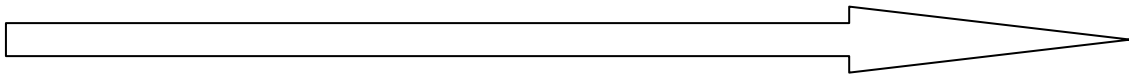
In the first model Aboderin presents a structural–functionalist model of family support for older people. Support for older parents (independent of the affective bond between parents and children) is moderated through incentive and enforcement. An incentive for supporting older relatives is the services older people exchange for support. These services rest on the traditional roles of older people and reflect the interdependence of different generations in traditional societies. Support for older relatives may also be enforced. Underlying this is a fear of religious, familial and/or economic sanction that may result from breaching the 'normative obligation wielded by the old'. Both incentive and enforcement reassert the filial obligation to honour and support older parents as a binding norm (Aboderin 2004).

In Aboderin's second model, features of modernisation—industrialisation and new technology, urbanisation, formal education and secularisation—are presented as undermining filial norms and obligations, and thus reducing the support provided to older relatives. Integral to this model is the notion that the loss of status and diminishing social roles decrease the incentives and enforcements of filial obligation (Aboderin 2004).

Decline in status as one grows old may also be attributed to declining productive powers. According to Kertzer and Keith (1984), explaining the post-productive phase of life was psychologist David Gutmann's primary aim and he suggested strong and crucial roles for older adults after the productive stage of child-rearing and parenthood. Gutmann identified through cross-cultural study a 'personality shift' as a universal aspect of ageing. According to Kertzer and Keith's (1984, p. 303) interpretation of Gutmann's work, women became 'more autonomous, competitive, aggressive, and instrumental, while men became more passive, expressive, and dependent'. Gutmann proposed a development sequence for this personality change in men, which suggested that men moved 'through successive Active, Passive and Magical Mastery ego stages' in later life (Table 3).

Table 3 Gutmann's mastery ego stages in later life

Type	Active mastery	Passive mastery	Magical mastery
Subtypes	Promethean-Competitive	Emphasised receptivity	
	Productive-Autonomous	Anxious constriction	



Gutmann used the male experience in a range of settings—Kansas City, traditional Navajo society, Druze society and Mayan societies—to show 'the universal passage across the mastery continuum'.

The Active Mastery type is 'founded on strivings towards autonomy, competence and control' and an 'active productive' orientation, whereas the Passive Mastery type, more applicable to adults aged 50 and over, is defined by humility and accommodation. In the Magical Mastery stage, vulnerability is the key to one's relationship with the outside world, and 'primitive defense mechanisms substitute for instrumental action'. This, according to Gutmann, suggested a 'country of old men', a dominion which older men occupy across cultures, which they do not share with other age groups. His continuum proved a counterpoint to the relativity of the ageing experience on the basis of culture, suggesting instead that the 'existential necessities' of older men operate independently from cultural circumstances (see Gutmann 1997).

This also implied a shift in gender roles and responsibilities. For Gutmann parenthood was the key life phase, after which men and women became more alike, able to express different energies and aspects of their personalities (Counts 1985). Further anthropological evidence also suggested that gender was not static in later life. Counts (1985) who worked with the Lusi Kaliai people of New Britain, however, found no transformation of gender identity or role behaviour for older women and men: only in dependency do the androgynous aspects of old age appear. For Counts (1985) this tied gender to social responsibility, a finding not entirely incompatible with Gutmann's model.

The idea of androgyny, or the weakening of gender roles and behaviour in later life, has wide currency in other disciplines. Sheehy (1995) for instance proposed the idea of 'The Sexual Diamond' to illustrate how men and women from their fifties onwards 'begin moving closer together ... and take on many characteristics of ... [their] gender opposites' (p. 318). By presenting the life course in the shape of a diamond, Sheehy shows how the gender gap begins to appear at puberty and widens to be greatest during the middle years. Around the mid-fifties, 'males and females become more like each other' as middle life disturbs 'old patterns', allowing new ones to emerge and precipitating a reconvergence of male and female attributes (Sheehy 1995, p. 318).

Project AGE and a 'good' old age

More recently, the variable status of older adults in different cultural settings has been explored through the prism of a *good old age*. Conducted between 1982 and 1990, Project AGE has been described as the 'most sophisticated cross-cultural approach to questions surrounding aging ever undertaken' (Sokolovsky 1990). This project applied a range of research methods to seven sites across the world and showed how community/structural features and values created distinct contexts for the ageing experience. It attempted also to determine what made a good or difficult old age. The study identified four main issues—(1) physical health & functioning, (2) material security, (3) family and (4) sociality—integral to understanding the positive and negative aspects of ageing in different contexts. Major differences were observed in the importance and manifestation of each issue according to the setting. The scale of the society (not to be equated with modernisation, yet heavily laden with such implications) was an important factor: older adults were more likely to become 'socially invisible' in larger communities (urban and suburban). Yet, the study reinforced cultural diversity and the variable meanings attached to older age. The quest 'for a good old age', which has strong classical and historical precedents (see, for example, Rentsch 1997; Taylor 1989), was constructed in Project AGE as a universal, but the primary aim of the study was 'how the cultural context in which people grow old creates a varied reality of what aging means' or how 'good' was construed and experienced according to culture was (see Sokolovsky 1990).

There is, nonetheless, a tension in anthropological studies of older age and ageing between universal propositions and cultural variables. We see also in the modernisation thesis the genesis of gerontology: ageing demographics emerged at the same time as gerontology, and as an important aspect of modern society. The rise of gerontology can also be explained through Foucault's concept of 'problematization' (see Moulaert & Biggs 2012, Katz 1996, and Powell and Biggs 2000). What the proponents of anthropological models consistently assert, which correlates with other models of old age, is that later life has its own distinct values. Myerhoff (1984) argues that life stages are segmented in any cultural setting, and given meaning through ritual; in contemporary society later life is bereft of ritual and therefore lacks meaning.

4 Indigenous Australian older adults

There are two prominent models of ageing in the Australian Indigenous context: the first posits that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people age prematurely; the second focuses on the valuable social and cultural roles Indigenous elders and older adults perform in a number of settings. Both require critical reflection, particularly in light of the growing number of older adults of ATSI background. Since 2001 the Australian Indigenous population has increased by a third, from just over 400,000 to 548,370 in 2011. In spite of a much younger age profile the ATSI population over the age of 60 has grown at a much faster rate than the total population over 60 (Cotter, Anderson & Smith 2007). There is thus a need to better understand demographic change, as well as the diversity of Indigenous Australian identities.

The 'premature ageing' model is principally health-related. Because of relatively poor health outcomes it suggests that Aboriginal people age much earlier than the general population. According to a recent study:

The idea that Indigenous Australians age prematurely is embedded in policy: for over two decades the age 50 years and over has been used to plan and allocate aged care services for the Indigenous population in the same way as the age 70 years is used for the non-indigenous population (Cotter et al. 2012, p. 69).

While there may be a pressing need for such policy to address poor health outcomes, and a clear set of benefits that flow from it, the study concludes: ‘Indigenous people in their fifties are not old. A decline into dependence at this age is not inevitable’ (Cotter et al. 2012, p. 73). Such a policy does not meet the urgent health needs of middle-aged Indigenous Australians and the disproportionate occurrence of chronic disease and disability among them. The early-ageing framework may in fact conceal the health needs of Indigenous Australians across the life course, further entrench disadvantage and result in inappropriate care services. Most importantly, it does not capture the rich and varying experience of older adults who identify as Indigenous, or the meanings they attach to later life.

A more positive framework has been developed through a growing number of social and cultural studies. Here older Aboriginal people are valued for their contribution in transmitting culture, maintaining language and kin relations and fostering strong community ties. Warburton and Chambers (2007) identify the transmission of cultural knowledge, education of the young and maintenance of kinship relations as key social roles of older Aboriginal adults. They point also to the respect due to elders and older Aboriginal people as ‘survivors’. The oral histories of older Aboriginal people reinforce these observations. The Victorian Indigenous Elders’ life stories and oral histories project records the voices of older Aboriginal people, their reflections on history and the role of Aboriginal elders (Aboriginal Community Elders’ Service & Harvey 2003). Likewise the personal accounts presented in *Mission voices* provide important details on missionary activities and the role of elders in Victoria (ABC, Film Victoria & Koori Heritage Trust 2004).

All of these sources reinforce the powerful role Aboriginal elders and older adults perform through transmission of cultural knowledge and representing a sense of the past. Yet, a more nuanced understanding of eldership in this context—its link with history, language, culture and country—is clearly warranted. Colleen Hayward (2012) indicates that in many Aboriginal cultures, eldership, as a role for those with recognised wisdom, is associated with personal aptitude rather than age. So it is possible to have elders who are not of advanced years, and older members of the community who are not considered wise. Misunderstandings of the relationship between wisdom, cultural memory and chronological age can produce claims to eldership which are not supported by traditional norms and values.

Understanding Aboriginal ageing according to the life course, rather than isolating and explaining discrete life stages, captures the complexities of cultural identity and avoids simplistic notions of positive or negative experiences of later life. Indeed, this is the approach championed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing Committee (ATSIAC) of the Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) and the Koori Growing Old Well Study currently underway. While heavily health-focused, this study’s promotion of ‘Growing Old Well’, by stressing the interconnection between ‘history, culture and context’, may provide a useful framework for understanding the cultural meanings of later life in other settings (Arkles et al. 2010). Through such an approach it can be appreciated how older Indigenous Australians draw meaning from multiple sources—from history and life experience; through traditional culture, language and expression; through family and relations, work and vocation; and in a range of other activities, such as dance, literature, poetry and painting, which reinforce cultural values and capture rich life experiences. Such an approach also has the potential to shed light on the diversity of Indigenous identity and expression, a point often missed in the two prominent models of Indigenous ageing.

5 Religious models of ageing

Religious frameworks as they relate to ageing are problematic: the long and complex history of established religious traditions does not always lead to single explanations of the ageing experience. Instead a diverse array of explanations, each shaped by unique historical, social, cultural and political forces, may be observed; even within a single religious tradition there are multiple, often conflicting representations of what ageing means. Moreover, religious beliefs, practices and traditions are experienced in a highly personal way; any attempt to provide a definitive explanation of ageing will not satisfy the diversity of religious experience. The approach here is to identify some of the key threads of Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian thought to open up discussion of the religious meanings of later life.

Defining religion as the ‘shared system of beliefs and associated practices based on a transcendent view of life’, Coleman (2010) among others argues that religious belief and spirituality become increasingly salient with age. Studies have noted that older people tend to be more religious than younger cohorts (see, for example, Davie & Vincent 1998), though such views tend to oversimplify religious affiliation and expression. Other studies have demonstrated the significant social and cultural support older adults draw from religious affiliation (McFadden 1995; Ventis 1995). Less attention has been directed towards the relationship between religion and meaning in later life, which Coleman (2010) contends is the fundamental question of religious belief and ageing. Religious beliefs often reinforce the psychological process of integration, which reaches its height during the later stages of life (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick 1986). According to Mehta (1997, p. 111) religion functions as ‘an effective thread in the integrative process at old age’. Most religions profess a respect for older age. However, important variations exist between religions. Therefore, this section outlines a number of religious models of ageing, mindful of the inherent complexities. All are relevant to Australian society, as the accompanying statistics on religious affiliation reveal.

Christianity

Relative to population growth and religious affiliation in general, Christian affiliation in Australia has declined in recent decades. This reflects a long-term decrease of people identifying as Christian, from 96 per cent of the population in 1911 to 61 per cent in 2011 (ABS 2012b). Nonetheless, Christianity remains the major religion in Australia and the most influential historically, socially and culturally. Just over 13 million people affiliate with one of the many Christian churches or traditions. The Catholic Church, with almost 5.5 million affiliates, is the largest, followed by Anglican (3.7 million), Uniting (1 million), Presbyterian and Reformed, Eastern Orthodox (of which Greek Orthodox is by far the largest), Baptist, Lutheran and Pentecostal. Other Christian churches, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, the Salvation Army, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Churches of Christ have much smaller numbers of followers.

Figures from the latest Census (2011) show that about 30 per cent of Christian affiliates are aged over 55 and around 18 per cent are over 65 (ABS 2012a). These figures are higher than the percentages aged over 55 and 65 in the total population (ABS 2007; ABS 2012a). At the same time, recent research indicates a general trend of decline in numbers of older Christian affiliates. Nonetheless, Christian values, beliefs and practices continue to provide meaning in the lives of older adults. In the following discussion common threads of Christian thought and tradition are drawn upon to construct a Christian framework of ageing.

McFadden and Thibault (2001) suggest that there is no formal theology of ageing that all Christians agree upon. However, basic Christian beliefs and significant traditions are used by scholars and theologians to propose meaningful frameworks of ageing and later life. Stephen Post (1992) draws on the Augustinian ‘model of virtuous ageing’ to explain the meaning of later life within Christianity. The Augustinian model proposes that there is no meaning that ‘does not begin in love for God and related virtues’; through this relationship with God ageing has meaning through ‘spiritual-ethical maturation’. In later life individuals should continue to cultivate Christian virtues; later life may also provide the opportunity to reflect on the ‘vices’ of early years, bringing one to a greater realisation of what being a Christian entails (Post 1992).

In elaborating Christian themes to construct a theology of ageing, Ames (2012) posits that the worship of idols and false gods prevents the ‘full flowering of our humanity, the unique person God has created us to be’ (p. 15). According to Ames, God’s gift of personhood is irrevocable: defined ontologically, relationally and functionally it is the greatest gift that allows one to develop a personal relationship with God. Furthermore, it is this relationship that may be the source of essential meaning throughout one’s life. Being an embodied, whole person also allows Christians to accept the realities of ageing and death. Post (1992) supports this view by suggesting that Christians may accept bodily deterioration by emphasising moral and spiritual values and as an opportunity to grow in virtue: the outer appearance of decay can become an inner process of fulfilment. Post (1992, p. 127) claims further that the dialectic between decline and redemption has been a central component of Christian thought since its beginnings. The dialectic provides a meaningful framework for understanding the vicissitudes of later life. Similarly, Ames (2012) positions the ageing body within an ageing universe created by God to provide a meaningful framework for bodily decay.

In a slightly different but related approach McFadden and Thibault (2001) discuss the concepts of *chronos* and *kairos* to reveal how Christianity can give meaning to the passing of time. The Christian fulfilment of time (*kairos*) refers to time replete with meaning. This meaningful concept of time may be expressed in various ways: by making the most of time; hoping for the future; continually creating and integrating a sense of self; and taking collective action. Most importantly *kairos* as a concept of time should be contrasted with the mechanical concept of *chronos*, which they argue inhibits spiritual development by disconnecting one moment from the next. The connection one makes between past, present and future is an essential component of personhood, according to McFadden and Thibault (2001).

While Catholicism and Protestantism place much emphasis on rationality and define personhood according to the rational faculty, Eastern Orthodox belief and tradition, Father Nikolaos Hatzinikolaou argues, has maintained a sense of mystery in life and death. The Orthodox Church therefore ‘avoids clear-cut statements that identify death with the cessation of the brain, cardiac or any other function’ (Hatzinikolaou 2003, p. 188). Nonetheless, Christian traditions share a strong belief in eternal life, though interpretations of this concept may differ. For example, McFadden and Thibault (2001) note considerable disagreement among Christians about the meaning of eternal life; some may have a very literal understanding of eternal life, while others conceptualise eternal life on the basis of God’s presence everywhere—in life as in death.

For those who believe in eternal life after death the concept can perform a vital function in old age by transforming the way in which the present is understood and perceived, allowing misfortune, suffering and deprivation to be endured in the faith that one will be in a better place following death (McGrath 2012, p. 26). For others the presence of God in all facets of

their lives may be enough. McFadden and Thibault (2001) cite the conviction of St Paul in I Corinthians 13:12 that God, who had been present with him at his birth, would be present with him at the hour of his death as sufficient to mitigate his fear of death. The linear conception of life, death and resurrection, however, differs considerably from cyclical notions as presented in the Hindu and Buddhist belief systems.

Christians also gain meaning from specific rituals. Through prayer and contemplation, *kairos* time may be enhanced, providing a break from the demands of everyday life. In another sense, the Christian rituals of the seven sacraments—baptism, reconciliation, Eucharist (first communion), confirmation, marriage, holy orders and anointing of the sick— mark significant life stages and events. (Different Christian denominations may emphasise different rituals, however). Christians have also maintained a strong belief in the healing role of the church (MacKinlay 2001) and churches continue to provide vital healing and health services to older adults. This reinforces important notions of a Christian community and social responsibility. A strong sense of belonging is established in the notion of a Christian community and a shared humanity (see, for example, Ames 2012). According to Hays and Hays (2003), the New Testament reinforces the similarity between generations, rather than the differences; Christ is a model for all regardless of age. Moreover, the scant reference to older adults in the New Testament is interpreted by Hays and Hays as a reflection of a community that did not see ageing as a problem.

Pherigo (2001), however, provides a scathing interpretation of Christian attitudes and beliefs with regard to ageing. In his view, Catholicism equates ageing as the movement towards death, while Protestantism links ageing with the loss of productivity; accordingly, both devalue the ageing process. Coleman (2010) also sees ageing as diminished within the Christian tradition and a consequent lack of respect for elders. The focus of the New Testament, the central text of Christian faith, is very much on renewal and rebirth and a high value is placed on youthfulness. Yet Ames (2012) provides a thoughtful counterpoint to this view: in Christian theology ageing merely makes the person part of the God-created world or universe that also ages. In ageing Christians may see themselves as part of a greater whole or process that gives life and sustains it but eventually facilitates its decline. In this way growth and decline may be integrated into a meaningful framework.

Christian practices and traditions, particularly those of the Orthodox Church, have established important roles for elders. The *starets* or holy elder has a long tradition in the Orthodox Church. Like the Hindu guru, the holy elder is defined as ‘a person who by his charismatic personality and saintliness was reckoned to have treasures to teach’ (Smart 1995, p. 340). Zossima, the holy elder in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, teaches the virtues of love thy neighbour and warns against isolation. Such a role is reserved for only a few, however, and may not apply equally to women.

In contemporary Australian society most Christian churches have developed roles for older adults. These may involve leading prayers, providing spiritual guidance and managing church business. But these are not generally roles reserved only for the old, or defined according to life stage or age group.

Judaism

In the most recent census (2011) about 97,300 people identified as Jewish, almost half of them born overseas (ABS 2012b). Growth of the Jewish population has been relatively steady over the past ten to fifteen years. The proportion of those affiliated with Judaism who are aged over 65 years

(18.7%) is significantly larger than the proportion of this age group in the national population (13.3%). According to Rubinstein (1995) a strong Jewish presence was established in Australia during the nineteenth century, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney. While most Jewish migrants prior to the 1930s were of the Anglo-Orthodox strand of Judaism, between 1933 and 1940 about 10,000 Austrian and German Jewish refugees migrated to Australia. A further 25,000 Holocaust survivors, mainly from Poland and Hungary, migrated between 1946 and 1957 (Rubinstein 1995). During this time, national and state Jewish representative bodies were established.

Australia's Jewish communities represent a diverse range of beliefs and practices. Nationality and language further define the diversity of Jewish life. Of the Jewish population over 65 years of age, 75 per cent were born overseas, in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Germany, the former USSR (including Ukraine and the Baltic states), South Africa and the United Kingdom. Most of these older Jews are thus from non-English speaking backgrounds, but many are multilingual. Languages other than English spoken include Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, German and Hebrew (Markus et al. 2011). This raises a number of issues about the relationship between ethnicity and religion, which Glickman and Koropeckyj-Cox (2009) argue requires a more nuanced understanding. Barbara Myerhoff's (1979) study of Jewish elders and Yiddish culture in California is a prime example of this approach.

According to the GEN08 Survey on Jewish Continuity (Markus 2011, p. 3), 'Judaism today exists along a spectrum of beliefs and practices, and the question of continuity changes according to where one is located along the continuum'. This study identified three segments in the Australian Jewish community: the core, middle and periphery. The core maintains a strong Jewish identity and is highly effective at passing on Jewish values to successive generations. Such identification and value transmission decreases incrementally throughout the middle and peripheral segments.

Yet identifying a common set of values is still possible. And, while Cohen (2010, p. 91) identifies what it means to be Jewish as one of the 'ongoing tensions in the Jewish world', evidence suggests a strong model of ageing and later life within Judaism.

The strong textual basis of Judaism provides numerous guides to ageing and later life. Most of the Jewish heroes—Abraham, Sarah, Moses and so on—were themselves advanced in age (Kendler & Morris 2012). In the Torah, the words for 'elders' and 'wise ones' are used interchangeably, reflecting the association of age with experience and wisdom (Kendler & Morris 2012). Old age is to be respected, as the common Jewish saying—'may you live to be 120'—suggests. Ageing may be considered part of God's gift of life, and the 'proper completion of a divine plan' (Pherigo 2001, p. 82).

Yet, there are two sides to every story. Ageing can also be a 'difficult and problematic process' (Sedley 2012). Hebrew texts describe in detail the 'infirmity' and 'failing powers' of older age (Cohen 2010, pp. 83–84). Therefore, ageing can be both a blessing and a curse. The approach to this contradiction is characteristically philosophical, lying as much in the course of one's whole life as in the experience of older age. According to Sedley (2012, p. 4) the Jewish perspective of ageing presents a 'nuanced portrayal of the complexity of old age', suggesting that individuals can prepare for later life, making it a positive experience and an inspiration for others. It seems that the overall message is to perceive old age as a blessing; importantly, however, honouring the aged is not the same as idealising the ageing process. As such, elders in the Jewish tradition fulfil a range of functions. Through their wisdom and experience elders are considered an important cultural and religious resource. According to Pherigo (2001, p. 81), 'Ageing increases one's status in Jewish circles, not only with one's children, but with the community as well'. Further, older adults are

expected and encouraged to continue learning. Intergenerational learning and teaching are also strongly encouraged (Sedley 2012).

Haber (2011, p. 306) claims that the honouring of elders in scripture has ‘been matched by contemporary deed in the community’. Across Australia, but particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, a long and proud tradition of aged care has resulted in aged support services catering for diverse needs. Moreover, a strong sense of Jewish identity has led to the establishment of a long list of representative bodies, community groups and research centres.

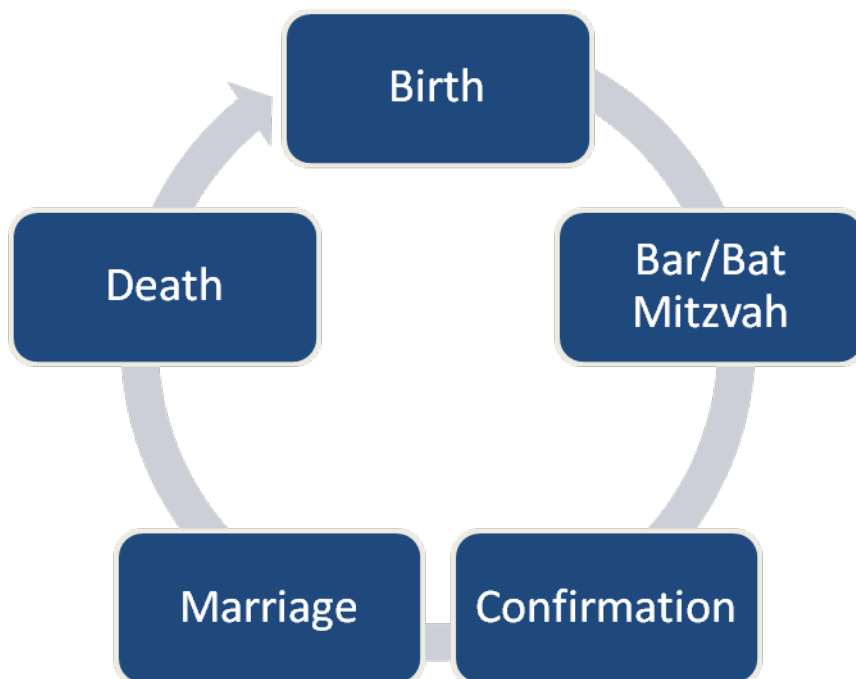
Of the life course or life cycle there are numerous sources and models. The *Pirkei Avot* or Chapters of the Fathers, teachings of Rabbis of the Mishnaic Period designates particular roles, based on religious study:

At five years old a person should study the Scriptures, at ten years for the Mishnah, at thirteen for the commandments, at fifteen for the Talmud, at eighteen for the bridechamber, at twenty for one’s life pursuit, at thirty for authority, at forty for discernment, at fifty for counsel, at sixty to be an elder, at seventy for gray hairs, at eighty for special strength (Psalm 90:10), at ninety for decrepitude, and at a hundred a man is as one who has already died and has ceased from the affairs of this world. (5:24)

<http://www.shechem.org/torah/avot.html>

This suggests a series of stages. Yet the Jewish life may also be presented as a cycle, divided according to rites of passage or significant transitions, which resonates in other Abrahamic faiths (see diagram).

The cycle of Jewish life



Based on Rabbi Scheinerman’s concept of the Jewish life cycle.

<http://scheinerman.net/judaism/LifeCycle/index.html>

Other models include the afterlife and other significant events such as *brit milah* (circumcision) or the *upsherin* (a three-year-old boy's first haircut). While old age does not appear as a separate category in the above diagram, its importance is reflected in scripture and Rabbinical teachings. These sources reinforce old age as a time of wisdom, spiritual maturity and continued learning.

Islam

Islam is considered the fastest growing religion in the world and statistics in Australia reflect this trend. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of affiliates of Islam in Australia increased by 69 per cent from 281,578 to 476,290. Over the same period those aged over 55 and affiliating with Islam almost doubled, from 21,204 to 41,354; a similar rate of growth occurred for those aged over 65, from 7756 to 16,046 (ABS 2012b). Of all those affiliating with Islam in 2006, 62 per cent were born overseas, including 9 per cent born in Lebanon and 7 per cent born in Turkey, followed by smaller percentages from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Indonesia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Iran, and numerous other countries (ABS 2008). As in all religions considerable diversity exists among affiliates of Islam, often on the basis of nationality, language and cultural identity. Nevertheless, Saeed (2004) argues that a sense of unity among Muslims is achieved in a number of ways, including common beliefs and practices, a common moral and ethical code and belief in belonging to a community of believers. The Koran and Sunna are important reference points which according to Duderija (2010, p. 111) provide the basis of religious identity for a 'variety of interpretative communities across the Muslim ideological divide'. Nonetheless, an Australian study of the social participation of Muslim men (primarily young men) revealed a strong religious identification which was independent of cultural background, place of birth and migration experience (Cultural & Indigenous Research Centre 2010). While Islamic beliefs range from orthodox interpretations to modern/liberal manifestations (Yasmeen 2008), a general model of ageing according to Islamic beliefs and practice is proposed here.

Islam is often described as a whole way of life. For example 'Its teachings encompass the legal, moral, ethical and spiritual dimensions of a human's life' and 'Success and happiness can only be found in the cleansing of one's heart and self' (Abdalla & Patel 2010, p. 112). There is a strong spiritual dimension of inner growth. Central to this is the Muslim belief in the one true God—'Allah'—the creator and sustainer of everything. An individual is required to 'live and act constantly according to God's Will' (cited in Abdalla & Patel 2010, p. 115). According to Coleman, Begum and Jaleel (2011), Islam simplified the 'relationship of man as servant to God and cultivated in practice a stronger sense of social responsibility' (p. 143). Submission to God can mean accepting the losses and pains that come with later life, but also creates a sense of belonging and community, and encourages particular coping strategies. A strong belief in an afterlife (*Jannah*) and a Day of Judgement pervades the Islamic world view: Muslims should live life 'in preparation for the promised hereafter' (Coleman, Begum & Jaleel 2011, p. 147). This may invoke a period of reflection in later life not dissimilar to other religions, but this should not be seen in isolation from one's whole life.

The five pillars of Islam—declaration of faith, prayer (five times per day and Eid prayers), charity (and generosity), fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca—play an important role in everyday life. Like all Muslims older adults are expected to pray five times a day, but may pray in a sitting position if unwell or frail. Prayer supports the notion of a Muslim community and sense of belonging. In the mosque, prayer provides social support and is proven to counter social isolation among older adults (see Coleman, Begum & Jaleel 2011). Likewise, fasting during the month of Ramadan is expected of all Muslims, but exemptions can be made for those considered too old or unfit. Yet, as Coleman,

Begum and Jaleel (2011) note, breaking with fasting due to ill-health or old age may be the cause of emotional pain for older adults: 'fasting is not only a religious obligation but a habitual activity that they have been engaged in since maturity'; and fasting is significant for older adults because it elevates one morally, creates community and 'reminds the whole society ... of those who are impoverished' (p. 148). Moreover, ill-health in old age may be viewed as temporary—a relatively trivial aspect of a short-term life—but faith in God will be rewarded eternally (Coleman, Begum & Jaleel 2011).

The family unit is central to the Muslim faith and filial duty is expected. Clear gender roles are defined. Islam over the ages has placed a strong emphasis on caring for older adults (Coleman, Belum & Jaleel 2011): 'As caring for the old is a religious duty and an honour, the idea of nursing homes for the old is seen as inconsistent with the dictates of Islam' (Abdalla & Patel 2010, p. 119). There are, however, emerging tensions between the duty to care for ageing parents/relatives, the demands of modern life and Western practices of aged care. A recent *New York Times* article detailed the challenges of establishing residential aged care facilities for Muslim elders in the United States: 'the idea of placing parents in facilities is still unthinkable, seen as a violation of a Koranic obligation to care for one's elderly relatives' (13 June 2006). Yet, given the ageing of Muslim populations many would argue that aged care homes for Muslims will need to be expanded. Affiliating aged and residential care services with a mosque and observing key Islamic beliefs and practices is considered the best option. While caring for older people remains a strong Islamic tradition, older adults are also expected to increase their spiritual attainments and 'become nobler in their conduct' as they age (Abdalla & Patel 2010, p. 123).

Tension between generations over cultural and religious values may be increased by the experience of migration. Many young Muslims see the mosque as a place for older men (Cultural & Indigenous Research Centre 2010). Nonetheless, older adults are important sources of wisdom. Elders can advise on marriage arrangements and divorce. In the absence of a clear religious hierarchy, older adults may attain a high level of religious knowledge because of their age, enabling them to proffer advice on religious and spiritual matters.

Hinduism

Of the 275,536 Australians who currently identify as Hindu, 23,164 (8.4%) are over the age of 55 and 9004 (3.3%) are over 65 (ABS 2012b). A large majority (84%) of these were born overseas, most coming from countries such as India, Fiji and Sri Lanka, with smaller numbers originating in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Mauritius and Singapore (ABS 2008). Between 2001 and 2011 Hinduism experienced the greatest percentage of growth of all non-Christian faiths in Australia—an increase about 190 per cent. Coming from a low base, this growth in Hinduism affiliates reflects the high number of recent young migrants from the Indian sub-continent and south-east Asia.

Important cultural differences are apparent among the Hindu population. Hindus from India have tended to retain a nominal adherence to their religion, reflecting increasing secularisation among urban Hindus in India, while on the other hand those from Sri Lanka, Fiji and Malaysia have tended to display stronger affiliations with Hinduism and have been more responsible for its organised religious expression in Australia (Bilimoria & Gangopadhyay 1988).

Mehta (1997) identifies three classical Hindu principles applicable to the current era and relevant to ageing: reincarnation, salvation (or *moksha*) and the law of *karma*. The cycle of life situates death as the passage to the next life and according to Coleman (2010, p. 167) devout Hindus are

‘remarkably unconcerned with death’. The ageing process affects the body not the soul (Tilak 1989) and is therefore accepted as a natural part (Mehta 1997) of a cycle. The spiritual journey of the soul only ceases upon reaching *moksha*. Thus, life is the opportunity for the liberation of the soul and an end to the cycle of life and death. The opportunity becomes increasingly salient with age and according to Mehta (2009, p. 43) provides a spiritual context for ‘personal integration before death’.

The cycle of life can be divided into four phases or *asramas*—*brahmacharya* (student), *garhastya* (householder), *vanaprasta* (late middle age withdrawal from worldly activities) and *sanyasa* (old age, the period of renunciation)—which in many ways reflect what are considered age-appropriate behaviours (see Table 5.1).

Table 4 The Hindu life course

Stage	Task or virtue
1. Apprenticeship or ‘student’ (<i>brahmacharya</i>)	Knowledge of dharma; study and the development of self-control
2. Householder (<i>garhasthya</i>)	Practice of dharma; marriage, career and family responsibilities
3. Withdrawal or ‘hermit’ (<i>vanaprastha</i>)	Teaching of dharma; gradual release from practical affairs and lessening attachment to worldly affairs
4. Renunciation or ‘ascetic’ (<i>samnyasa</i>)	Realisation of dharma; withdrawal from public participation; a life of simplicity

Source: Based on the work of Kakar (1968) and Manheimer (2000)

The Hindu model is here presented in a linear fashion, but is perhaps best represented as wheel or cycle as is the case in various Buddhist life cycle diagrams. When represented in cyclical fashion one can see how reincarnation works to inspire a particular, continuous vision of life and death, which promotes a meaningful understanding of time.

The gains and losses experienced throughout the life cycle are attributed to *karma*, which continues for multiple lifetimes. This allows some acceptance of negative and positive experiences, particularly of adversity in later life. Such acceptance may, however, be a challenging process, as it potentially involves reflection on life’s successes and failures (Mines 1981). For Ram-Prasad (1995, p. 30) ‘Renunciation ... is not the denial of or the rejection life; it is the acceptance of its limited, provisional meaning’. Thus, a personal search for truth may be a defining feature of the latter phases of life, especially *sanyasa*. It may also involve withdrawing from positions of seniority to focus on inner spiritual dimensions and in the process ‘generate the vital autonomy of older age’ (Mines 1981, p. 120). This autonomy can be a positive outcome of ‘disengagement’ and an influential component, according to Atchley (2001), of Tornstam’s concept of ‘gerotranscendence’.

While such soul-searching is highly personal, strong familial ties shape the ageing experience within Hinduism. For Coleman (2010), old age represents maturity, making the Hindu religion an age-friendly one and providing numerous positive role models. A ‘cultural emphasis on treating old age as the final opportunity to gain spiritual progress, since worldly or material responsibilities were now diminished’ (Mehta 2009, p. 43) reinforces this sense of maturity and the respect accorded to older people. Likewise Ram-Prasad (1995) argues that old age could be seen as the

most important stage—one which may, however, create a distance between the older generation and the young. This has important implications for the social roles of older Hindus.

Hindu elders are responsible for transmitting religious values and traditions to the young, which can help to bridge the gap between generations. There is according to Mehta (1997) a strong emphasis in Hinduism on transmitting religious rituals and traditions, rather than religious teachings. The transmission of religio-cultural values may be achieved through role-modelling and telling stories (Mehta 1997). Participation in religious activities is also strong among older Hindus, attesting to the importance of Hindu shrines and certain forms of worship. Such involvement is considered less formalised than some Islamic and Christian religious activities and offers older people more flexibility in worship and prayer.

Fear of losing culture and tradition to the modern world may enhance the roles of older Hindus in their community, but tensions are evident in relation to traditions of filial duty and care. A recent British study of Hindu identity found that while Hinduism promotes respect for older adults, modern and changing demands of the younger generations are impinging on traditional values of care and filial duty (Berkeley 2006).

Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the fastest growing faiths in Australia and growth is particularly marked among younger people. One of the reasons for this, Coleman (2001, p. 20) contends, is the ‘powerful affinity between [the] methods, goals and perspectives Buddhism has to offer and the dilemmas of life in the postmodern world’. In the 2011 census 528,977 people affiliated with Buddhism, more than half of them aged between 15 and 44. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of people aged over 55 years who affiliated with Buddhism increased by from 42,203 to 95,565 (ABS 2012b). Nearly three-quarters of those affiliating with Buddhism were born overseas, in countries such as Vietnam, China, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan and Korea. There is a growing number of Buddhists born in Australia; an even greater number of people practise Buddhist techniques and/or read books on Buddhist philosophy but do not identify as Buddhists, but the exact figures are difficult to determine. According to Coleman (2001), much of the growth of Buddhist thoughts and practices in Western societies has occurred among the middle and upper classes, the highly educated and liberal-minded. Like the Hindu religion, Buddhism presents an attractive image of later life and old age: a period ‘when a person’s concerns should be primarily spiritual, concerned with the path of emancipation from reincarnation’ (Coleman 2010).

In classical Buddhist thought Buddha attained insight from confronting old age, disease and death (Coleman 2010). Attitudes to life and health are thus developed in response to suffering and the inevitability of ageing and death. Many have suggested a particular pessimism towards ageing arising from views of impermanence and the inevitable decline of the body. Yet Buddhism would seem to propose a healthy mental attitude towards ageing, as enunciated in the Four Noble Truths—the essence of Buddhist thought—which outline the nature of suffering, its origins in one’s outlook and attitude, its cessation and the path to liberation from suffering (Coleman 2010; Gregory 2012). Ageing can reflect good *karma*, providing the opportunity for enlightenment (Coleman 2010). There may be a renunciation of the material world, particularly in the later stages of life, and further development of a sense of the spiritual. Old age can thus be the stage of emancipation from reincarnation with a heightened understanding of impermanence (Coleman 2010). The realisation of impermanence and the attainment of knowledge are the two main goals in life according to Rinpoche (1994).

The life cycle is represented in Buddhist thought and belief as the wheel of life. There are many versions of the wheel of life; they suggest a highly integrated life course organised in distinct life stages, which together should form a spiritual whole and/or journey. As in Hinduism the different experiences of Buddhist men and women and the different roles and responsibilities in later life require more research.

Confucianism

Confucianism is variously described as a religion, a moral philosophy and a code of conduct. Tu Weiming, a renowned New Confucian ethicist and academic, defines Confucianism as ‘a mental regimen teaching the way of humanity’ (Weiming & Ikeda 2011, p. 79). He states also that it a ‘philosophy that permeates daily life and supports self-realisation’. Confucian ideals such as moral development, family solidarity and filial piety (Ikels 1989) remain strong throughout East Asia, though some writers point to the effects of modernisation (Cheung & Kwan 2009; Sung 1997). Important differences may be observed on the basis of history and location. While the number of Confucian adherents in Australia appears from the Census data to be small, Confucian thought and philosophy, particularly for migrants from countries steeped in Confucian traditions, continue to shape personal meanings of life. Given the considerable numbers of migrants to Australia from China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore and Hong Kong, some attempt to discern the meaning of later life in Confucian traditions is warranted.

In the *Analecets*, the foundational text of Confucian thought, Confucius described his own life course:

At the age of fifteen, I set my mind on study. At the age of thirty, I established myself; at forty, I had no doubts. At fifty I knew the choice of Heaven; at sixty, my ears were tuned to it; and, at seventy, I could follow the desires of my heart without going beyond the bounds of proper behavior (cited in Rainey 2010).

This oft-quoted passage presents a positive picture of older age, of increasing knowledge, wisdom and self-awareness. Indeed, learning is central to Confucianism. The ‘human task’ of Confucianism according to Murata (2011) is to learn how to be human, to pursue *ren*, the one thread that runs through Confucian teachings. Rainey (2010) describes *ren* as humanity, but terms such as benevolence, love and altruism are also used. *Ren* is the ‘single quality that brings together all the essential qualities of human nature’ (Murata 2011). Cultivating moral virtues is the way to develop our humanity, and with it our links to the social world.

The moral virtues Confucius and his followers instructed people to cultivate include filial piety, courage, honesty and sympathy for others. Li (2010) draws the link between longevity and moral cultivation, arguing that this connection ‘promotes a holistic, healthy life’. Because of this, old age in the Confucian tradition may be a sign of moral achievement, on which respect and reverence are based (Li 2010). The reverence for older adults derived from Confucian principles has led scholars to conclude that Eastern societies promote a more positive view of ageing and older age than is evident in Western societies (see, for example, Yun & Lachman 2006).

Atheism, agnosticism and non-belief

To date very little attention has been paid to how older adults without religious faith deal with the vicissitudes of ageing and older age (Coleman 2011). Given that the number of those expressing no religious affiliation is on the rise (particularly for those in the 55–64 years category), further

inquiry is clearly required. However, in a recent study comparing the coping mechanisms of the highly religious and the unreligious, Wilkinson and Coleman (2010) found that humanist ideals are as effective as traditional religious beliefs for individuals confronted with difficult issues of ageing. Indeed, the study provides evidence that a humanist outlook can fulfil the traditional functions of religious belief—explanation, guidance, consolation and inspiration—as articulated by Richard Dawkins (2006). Dawkins argues also that the non-belief in an afterlife prompts him to treasure the life he lives and make the most of the present time. Clearly, the search for existential meaning in later life is not dependent on religious belief or practice.

Summary of the role of religion in providing meaning

Gerontological studies of religion emphasise the integrative role of religion in later life, and point to the fact that all religions provide a sense of meaning and purpose in later life. Such an observation highlights the spiritual and essential commonalities that span different religions. The following points summarise the meaningful role religion plays in later life and suggest some areas for further inquiry:

- According to Atchley (1997), ageing brings with it the conditions—physical, psychological and social—conducive to spiritual development and inquiry. For older adults religious beliefs and traditions are an important source for addressing spiritual and existential concerns.
- All religious belief systems and traditions provide important resources to give meaning to ageing and later life. Comparing Buddhism and Christianity, Jianbin and Mehta (2003) found that despite fundamental differences of belief, ‘there are far fewer differences in the ways [these two religions] impact on the integrative ageing process’ (p. 500); they both provide ‘respective cognitive schemas, behavioral guidelines, and healing powers for adjustment to physical decline’ (p. 492). MacKinlay (2006) argues that religious symbols provide some of the most potent means to support meaning-making in later life. Moreover, every religion provides the necessary (and often most easily accessible) language and concepts to make sense of the life course and later life.
- Religions provide a sense of belonging and rootedness, which becomes more salient with age (Coleman 2010). Balancing the social/community with the personal/individual may reach a critical point in later life; the decreasing autonomy that can come with age may upset the social/personal balance. By situating the autonomous individual within a community, religion can help older adults resolve these tensions and provide the support they need to maintain a sense of agency. Through belief in the transcendent, older adults are able to deal with the vicissitudes of life in a meaningful way.
- Religious beliefs and practices such as prayer, ritual, meditation and contemplation provide a more meaningful sense of time than mere chronological time.
- There is very little consideration of gender in the religious models discussed above. To understand religious belief and gender requires closer attention to social and historical context. Research into personal experiences of religious belief would also shed light in this area.
- Most religions promote an ethos of care towards older adults; most also revere the older adults for their wisdom and/or spiritual maturity. There is a general need to explore the correlation between these cultural ideals and social reality.
- Religious belief and spirituality are not fixed but dynamic (Coleman 2010). A phenomenological study on the role of religion in later life would illuminate how religion shapes experience.

6 Ethnicity and ageing

As Rowland (2007) observes, ethnicity is multidimensional, involving factors such as culture, language, birthplace and religion. While it is complex, ethnicity has a profound impact on the experience of ageing. Much has been written on the care needs of older adults from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and the government has classed such older adults as a special needs group. This grouping, and the contrasts with 'mainstream' older adults that it engenders, tends to conceal significant diversity that exists among ethnic groups. More recently attempts have been made to understand the social and cultural aspects of ageing for particular ethnic groups (see for example National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2011) and to investigate the intersection of birthplace, nationality, language, culture and religion as components of ethnicity. The following discussion assesses the Southern and Northern European models of ageing, as well as the Asian filial piety model, recognising that more inquiry is required.

Southern/Northern European models

Models of ageing can be constructed for Southern European and Northern European migrant populations. The evidence primarily derives from Reher's (1998) seminal study of family structures in Europe, which pointed to relatively weak family ties in the centre and north of Europe and strong family ties in the southern or Mediterranean regions. Many of Reher's key findings, such as levels of co-residence and family care, are reflected in current studies of the immigrant aged in Australia (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2011). For instance older adults from Southern European countries including Italy, Greece and Macedonia have lower divorce rates, are less likely to live alone and are more likely to look after grandchildren and/or co-reside with other family members than their Northern European or Australian-born counterparts. Reher also proposed that Northern European countries such as the Scandinavian nations, the British Isles and the Low Countries displayed weaker family ties but a stronger state welfare system, tending also 'to be associational societies with a deep civil component' (Reher 1998, p. 217). In Australia, migrants from these countries are more likely to live alone and be more proficient in English than those from Southern Europe (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2011). Care must be taken with an approach based on the north and south divide in Europe, which is a complex and changing social and cultural situation. More to the point, the experience of ageing for older migrants in Australia is shaped by a combination of factors, not just cultural background. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider how strong and weak family ties may shape the experience of ageing for migrants in Australia.

Asian model of filial piety

The cultural tradition of filial piety has existed for centuries in East Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan (Sung 2000). Although this 'classical social ideal' is perhaps more complex and multi-dimensional than a basic definition suggests (Sung 1995), Streib (1987) revealed that older adults in China commanded more respect and a higher status than their counterparts in the United States. This, he found, related in part to the longstanding Confucian tradition of filial piety and obligation.

Recent Australian research indicates that filial responsibilities have remained strong among migrants born in Asian countries; and that older adults from Asian countries are less likely to live alone and more likely to be living with other family members, usually their children, than older

adults born in Australia or other English-speaking countries (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre 2011). This suggests that the tradition remains relevant.

However, a number of factors have changed the nature and extent of filial obligation. Some scholars argue that the process of modernisation has undermined filial obligations, or at least has changed the practice of filial piety. Sung (1997, p. 88) argues that a new kind of filial piety is emerging in Korea, one in which ‘mutual respect and reciprocal care and support are considered more important than submission to the authority of the elder’. Another study found that while the extent of modernisation loosely correlated with diminishing filial responsibilities this connection was less pronounced among the highly educated, suggesting that education may enhance filial piety in particular circumstances (Cheung & Kwan 2009). Confucianism, in so far as it promotes an ordered society, creates principles of security and status for older adults. The effects on intergenerational relations of contemporary conditions and of migration to different cultural contexts have yet to emerge.

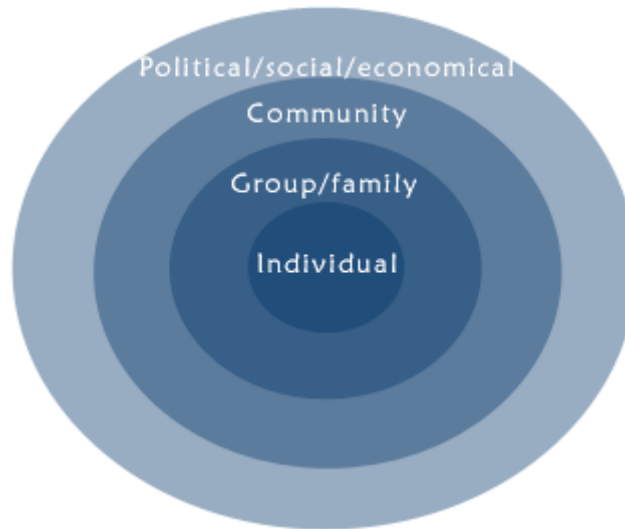
7 Ecological model of human development

Bronfenbrenner conceived the ecological environmental model to explain how individual development is influenced by environmental systems or structures. The model consisted of a set of nested structures which were used initially to explain how intrafamilial processes are affected by extrafamilial circumstances and conditions (Schiamberg & Gans 2000, p. 336). The model has since been adapted for many applications, for example to explain the complex causes of elder abuse (Schiamberg & Gans 2000).

In the model the developing individual sits at the centre, enveloped successively by the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. These systems represent different structural forces. The microsystem or immediate context is typically the family. The mesosystem represents ‘relationships between the family and other principal settings’ and may include formal and informal support systems (Schiamberg & Gans 2000, pp. 336–7). The exosystem bears an indirect influence on the developing individual and is typically described as the setting in which family members of the older adult participate. The macrosystem refers to broad norms and values and is understood as ‘the consistency observed within a given culture or subculture in the form and content of its constituent micro-, meso-, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 258).

The Victorian Department of Health has adopted the basic principles of Bronfenbrenner’s model to illustrate the social determinants of health and the relationship of individual health to group/family, community and political/social/economical factors (see diagram). Although the mesosystem is not represented in their diagram, it may be inferred in the relationship between the group/family and community.

VicHealth social determinants of health: an ecological model



Source: Victorian Department of Health 2011

When applied in combination with a life-course perspective, the model identifies the significance of social roles, synchronises individual development and transition with family and collective developments and respects the cumulative effect of previous life events (Schiamberg & Gans 2000). This promotes a holistic approach to individual development in later life. Secondly, the model stresses continuing development of the older adult and challenges notions of personal decline and stagnation.

8 Psycho-social models

Erikson's model

Erikson (1963) proposed a psychosocial model of the life-cycle with eight distinct stages (Table 5). Each predetermined stage involves a dynamic balance of opposites, or *syntonic* and *dystonic* dispositions. By balancing the opposing dispositions of each stage a person develops the necessary strength(s) to negotiate successive ones. These stages may also be interpreted as turning points or crises. Failure to achieve a balance may result in maladaptation or malignancy. The overall goal is to develop 'ego-integrity' with each stage integrated into a functional whole.

In older age a person must balance the *syntonic* disposition of integrity with the *dystonic* disposition of despair in order to develop the desired outcome of wisdom. This balancing act does not necessarily exclude 'legitimate feelings of cynicism and hopelessness', but rather keeps them in 'dynamic balance with feelings of human wholeness' (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick 1986, p. 72). Moreover, the old-age struggle between integrity and despair depends on the balancing of earlier psychosocial tensions, a 'resynthesis of all the resilience and toughness of the basic strengths already developed' (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick 1986, p. 40). Thus,

this ultimate integration comprises all of those conscious and unconscious processes by which the individual at the end of life seeks to reexperience and to bring again into scale each of the psychosocial themes that ... have given shape to the life cycle (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick 1986, p. 72).

In other words the last stage of the ‘life cycle weaves back on itself in its entirety, ultimately integrating maturing forms of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, and care, into a comprehensive sense of wisdom’ (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick 1986, p. 56). In this final life stage, ‘presumption’ can arise from the overdevelopment of integrity, disdain by overdoing despair. The overall goal of ‘ego-integrity’ in later life is the potential for developing into self-realisation and transcendence.

Table 5 Erikson’s psychosocial stages of life

Old age								Integrity vs despair. WISDOM
Adulthood							Generativity vs self-absorption CARE	
Young adulthood						Intimacy vs isolation. LOVE		
Adolescence					Identity vs confusion FIDELITY			
School age				Industry vs inferiority. COMPETENCE				
Play age			Initiative vs guilt. PURPOSE					
Early childhood		Autonomy vs shame, doubt. WILL						
Infancy	Basic trust vs basic mistrust. HOPE							

Although it represents development from an individual perspective, one that originates through internal processes, Erikson’s model does not treat the individual in isolation from her/his social environment. Through the concept of mutuality, Erikson traces a person’s involvement and interaction with a ‘widening social radius in predetermined steps’, and society’s ‘readiness ... to welcome, invite, and influence this interaction’ (Erikson 1963, p. 270). By weaving back in on itself, the model also suggests that meaning is made through previous life events and transitions. Moreover, Erikson suggests that meaning at any point can be identified through four coordinates: the contemporary stage of life of the individual, his/her life-history, the contemporary stage of the socio-cultural unit he/she is part of, and the history of the socio-cultural unit.

The model does promote a predetermined script for the life course that could imply an accepted or ‘normal’ way to grow old. There is, according to Estes, Biggs and Phillipson (2009, p. 33), ‘an uncritical reflection of a production model of ageing’ inherent in Erikson’s model of stages and associated life tasks. Hazan (1996) argues that Erikson’s concept of ‘ego-integrity’, as cultural paradigm, reveals ‘more of the expectations and fears of middle age than of the actual phenomenology of ageing’.

Jungian model

According to Jung, the human life cycle is divided into four stages: childhood, youth/young adulthood, middle life and old age. Unlike his contemporary Freud, Jung attached greater meaning to the second half of life. He stated in *Modern man in search of a soul* (2005 [1933]):

A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning. (p. 112).

In contrast to the first half of life, which was largely turned outwards, in middle life and old age the focus changed to the inner development of 'personality' (see diagram).

The Jungian life course (first and second halves of life)



Source: Biggs 1999b

The task for self during the second half of life is 'to reintegrate the conscious, social mind with the unconscious in order to develop the whole personality' (Kelleher 1992, p. 26). This process Jung termed 'individuation'; and it was only possible, he believed, during the second half of life. According to Peter O'Connor (1985, p. 96):

The peculiar paradox ... of becoming an individual through the process of individuation is that it facilitates belonging to the whole and the universal by recognising what is unique in each of us and yet paradoxically at the same time shared; the recognition of the relationship between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic worlds.

Jung expressed the complexity of this process when he stated:

I am astonished, disappointed, pleased with myself. I am distressed, depressed, rapturous. I am all things at once, and cannot add up the sum ... Yet there is so much that fills me: plants, animals, clouds, day and night, and the eternal in man. The more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things. In fact it seems to me as if that alienation which so long separated me from the world has become transferred into my own inner world, and has revealed to me an unexpected unfamiliarity with myself (cited in Hillman 1999).

This would seem at first to contradict Jung's maxim of 'know thyself'. Yet the process of individuation—of becoming oneself—may in fact require an acceptance of uncertainty and contradiction; the goal of reconciling opposites may in fact be replaced by an appreciation of their coexistence, of the interrelatedness of all things. The spiritual and transcendental dimensions of this approach are obvious, as the primary objective of later life (Kelleher 1992) may be the discovery of meaning in all things, an acceptance of uncertainty and an appreciation of other-worldliness. There is thus a strong sense that transcendence is the true aim and goal of later life.

Positive ageing

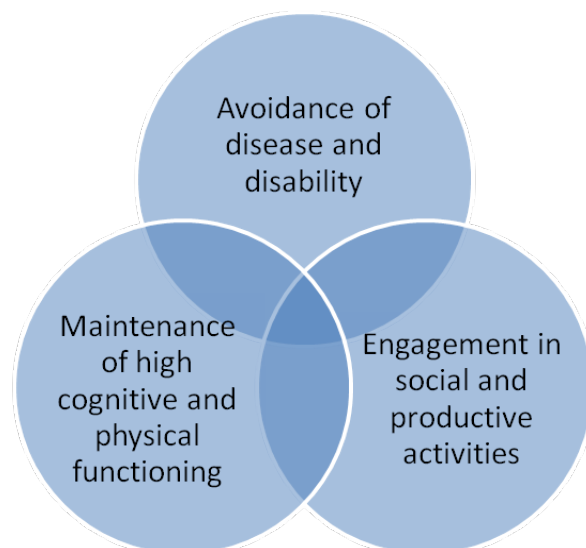
'Positive' ageing, now popular in representations of the ageing process, has helped to challenge assumptions of decline and dependency in later life. One of its major proponents, Martin Seligman, in *Authentic happiness* (2002) proposed an equation which he termed the 'Happiness Formula':

$$H = S + C + V$$

In this formula, happiness (H) equalled the total of a person's set range (S) plus the circumstances of their life (C) plus factors under their voluntary control (V). The factors a person can influence or control (V) are the most important of all ingredients. Through 'satisfaction about the past', 'optimism about the future' and 'happiness in the present', Seligman (2002, p. 61) suggests that 'your level of happiness is likely to increase lastingly'. Ageing positively is prefigured as an individual responsibility which anyone can attain.

In the positive ageing framework one can discern notions of 'active', 'productive' and 'successful' ageing. While only the 'successful ageing' model is discussed below, it can be noted that all three notions 'problematise' older age (Estes, Biggs & Phillipson 2009). Rowe and Kahn's (1997) model of successful ageing identifies three ingredients—avoidance of disease and disability, maintenance of high cognitive and physical functioning and engagement in social and productive activities—as integral to a successful old age.

Rowe and Kahn's model of successful ageing



This multidimensional model of later life combines health, psychological and social aspects to identify individual risk factors and to enable policy makers or service providers to develop

appropriate interventions to enhance successful ageing to greater numbers of older adults (Rowe & Kahn 1997). It presents a largely positive image of the older adult, one who is more able to ‘manage’ the gains and losses which life presents than her/his younger counterparts, through highly developed processes of ‘selection, compensation and optimization’ (Estes, Biggs & Phillipson 2009, pp. 69–70). Yet, the model alone does not iterate what success actually means in the context of ageing and later life. As Baltes and Carstensen (1996) suggest, the definition of success changes over time according to social, cultural and biological norms. Instead, they propose a process-oriented approach, which focuses on goals and strategies rather than the outcomes. This approach acknowledges the heterogeneity of older adults and the losses *and* gains that accompany later life (Baltes & Carstensen 1996).

9 Contemporary cultural models

Another contemporary model from which meaning in later life is derived is the recent Ulyssean Ageing model. This involves ‘the seeking of new ideas and activities, new learning and intellectual, psychological, and emotional growth in the later years’ (Onyx & Leonard 2007, p. 384) and applies mainly to the younger-old. The model draws significantly from Paul Laslett’s (1989) concept of the ‘Third Age’ as a period of self-enrichment and from studies on the recreational activities of those in the middle and later stages of life (see for example McGuire, Boyd & Tedrick 1999; McLeish 1976).

Numerous examples of Ulyssean ageing can be found, but this study looks at Grey Nomads, ‘encore’ careers and volunteerism. All three contribute to a better understanding of this cultural model of ageing, which many would argue represents a rejection of the ‘ageing as decline’ model (Onyx & Leonard 2007).

Grey Nomads

Onyx and Leonard (2007, p. 384) define Australia’s Grey Nomads as ‘people aged over 50 years, who adopt an extended period of travel (at least three months) independently within their own country’. They travel throughout Australia by caravan, campervan or converted bus, often for several years. While some have linked them with the North American ‘snowbirds’ phenomenon, Grey Nomads differ significantly from their American counterparts in motivation, time travelled and social activities (Onyx & Leonard 2005). ‘Snowbirds’ are seasonal migrants who travel from the northern snowbelt of Canada and North America to the warmer southern states, often staying in designated recreational resorts (McHugh & Mings 1991). Grey Nomads, on the other hand, combine travel with a sense of adventure and visit isolated parts of the country, often with little pre-planning. It is this sense of spontaneity and freedom that creates an alluring travelling experience.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Grey Nomads number in the thousands, but firm figures are hard to ascertain. What is known, however, is that Grey Nomads usually travel in couples, sustaining social contact with fellow travellers on the road and at camping sites. Intriguingly, ‘The more isolated and the less developed the camping ground, the greater ... [is] the social interaction’ (Onyx & Leonard 2007, p. 394). Grey Nomads are relatively healthy, but by no means all wealthy. They seem to resist being organised, preferring short stays and avoiding busy tourist traps. While fulfilling personal goals and aspirations, the Grey Nomads also make a valuable contribution to the economies of small communities and recent research has outlined their capacity for volunteering (Onyx & Leonard 2007). According to Onyx and Leonard (2007) Grey Nomads represent a unique

social and cultural phenomenon—a reflective, active model of later life based on freedom, discovery and adventure. The model also echoes features of the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture.

Encore careers

Increasing numbers of older adults are using later life as a period to establish what Marc Freedman has termed the ‘encore career’—‘meaningful and sustaining work later in life’ (*New York Times*, 11 February 2008). Freedman further defines the term as ‘one that combines personal fulfilment, social impact and continued income, enabling retiring workers to achieve a social good while satisfying their own unmet passions’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 March 2012). To this end he established Civic Ventures and the Experience Corps in the United States to funnel older adults into purposeful and lasting work. Freedman estimates that millions of older adults are ‘launching second careers in areas like education, health care, the nonprofit sector and government’ (*New York Times*, 11 February 2008).

Taking up this sort of work has helped many older adults realise life-long dreams. According to Dychtwald and Kadlec (2010, p. xx): ‘Adulthood and maturity is a time not only to cultivate knowledge and wisdom but also to replant and re-fertilize the soil’, using the knowledge and experienced gained through life to benefit family and community. Similarly, Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick (1986) argue that old age is ‘one more chance to make things right’.

To illustrate, Anne Beasley progressed along a fairly conventional life course: she left school early, trained as a typist, married and raised a family. Her life after sixty, however, is anything but conventional. Now 70, she has completed a law degree, has worked for legal aid and the Family Court and intends to complete a PhD. She realised ‘an unfulfilled teenage dream of studying law’, at the same time making a valuable contribution to society. Others have been similarly successful in embarking on second careers of personal enrichment. John Sloan, now 61, succumbed to parental pressure and became an accountant but is now employed as a professional singing teacher. Professor John Webb, now 68, a career academic, recently put off retirement to take up a diplomatic post.

These examples may be the exceptions, however; for establishing an ‘encore’ career is not an easy task. Figgis describes setting up an ‘encore’ career, like much of the Third Age, as a journey without maps and little support. Moreover, middle-class professionals may have a distinct advantage at this sort of transition (Figgis 2012). And those capable of self-directed learning and critical reflection are also more able to embark on an ‘encore’ career and negotiate the steps that such a career demands (Billet & Woerkom 2008). This, according to Figgis (2012), further underscores the need for more training and support services to assist older adults of the ‘third age’.

Volunteering

While ‘encore’ careers may be the exception, there is a vast array of volunteer opportunities open to older adults, which provide personal enrichment in later life. According to Bradley (2000) volunteering gives meaning to the lives of older adults, provides an enhanced sense of purpose and contributes to personal growth and productivity. Studies of volunteerism in Australia indicate that older volunteers are fewer in number than younger volunteers, but by comparison tend to be more committed and devote more time to their volunteering (Onyx & Warburton 2003). Moreover, volunteerism among older adults reveals ‘multiple and valued social roles’ (Onyx & Warburton 2003, p. 68) and benefits individuals across cultures. Warburton and McLaughlin’s (2005) study of informal volunteerism amongst older adults concluded that such activities provide meaning in later

life and contribute to older adults' identities, suggesting also that volunteering performs a valuable function in society.

Volunteering for older adults can also help in the transition between work and retirement, as 'an important part in creating an identity ... apart from paid work' (Bradley 200, p. 49). Successful volunteer programs should match the abilities, needs and aspirations of older adults with suitable roles. Volunteering may also be a way for older adults to come to terms with the limits of older age, without diminishing personal worth and continued purpose in life.

10 Political activism and participation

Instances of political and social activism among older adults are easy to find, but remain largely unacknowledged in popular perceptions of the ageing experience. The historical record is rich with examples of older adults' political activities. The following discussion is highly selective, but should stimulate some discussion of political activism among older adults and encourage more detailed research.

Indeed, political and social activism among older adults was prominent during the twentieth century, particularly around old age pension rates, and continues in a number of different forms. In the United States, where much of the contemporary research has been conducted, adults over 50 have the highest voting rates, and are arguably more politically active than younger cohorts (Brown 2003). Campbell has developed the theory that US social security payments, introduced in the mid-twentieth century, changed the political status of older adults, as it gave them the time and resources to pursue politics, encouraged them to become politically aware and made them politically relevant (Campbell 2011; Brown 2003).

In Australia, according to Ellis (1981) local old age and invalid pensioners' associations came together to form large, state-based organisations from the 1930s. In 1954 Marjorie Nunan established the Combined Pensioners' Association in Victoria, leading to similar groups in other states. The main aim of these groups was to campaign for an increase to the pension, but issues around housing and health were also addressed. Of Nunan and the organisations she inspired, the *Age* stated in 1955:

And so the cause for increased pensions is being fought by the pensioners themselves—elderly men and women, many in bad health who should be able to withdraw from the fray of life. But they are in it, fighting for a living, led by one of their own number who is a cripple.

In 1956 a deputation from the Combined Pensioners' Association, now with national representation, went to Canberra to campaign. They collected 120,000 signatures in support of their call for pensions to be half the basic wage (Bundock 2000). Failing to gain a hearing with the Treasurer, Sir Arthur Fadden, they sat on the steps of Parliament House, ready to stay the night if necessary. They were eventually received by the Treasurer, and the 'united voice' of the pensioners was finally heard (Ellis 1981). The protest may have been more radical than is first assumed; it challenged prominent notions of decline, inactivity and apathy in later life, and paved the way for subsequent organisations.

In the United States, the Gray Panthers, founded by Margaret 'Maggie' Kuhn in the 1970s, is perhaps the best-known political movement centred on age-related rights. The movement still promotes social participation on a broad range of issues. Kuhn claimed to wear the signs of ageing as 'badges of distinction'. In an interview with gerontologist Dychtwald in 1978 she articulated the

unique advantages of growing old: ‘You can speak your mind, outlive you detractors and tap into the incredible energy of the young, while making use of the knowledge and experience that comes after living a long, full life’ (cited in Dychtwald 2012). Kuhn countered some of the myths of the ageing experience, including treating being old as a disease and older adults as mindless, useless, sexless and powerless. Her concluding remarks of the interview are worth repeating in full:

We are a new breed of old people. There are more of us alive today than at any other time in history. We are better educated and healthier, with more at stake in this society. We are the elders, the experienced ones: we are maturing, growing adults, deeply concerned for the well-being and survival of our society. Instead of retiring from life, I am pleased and excited to be able to recycle and redirect my goals. I continue to realize that old age is a time of great fulfillment – personal fulfillment – when all the threads of life can be woven together.

The psycho-social process of integration in later life is prominent in Kuhn’s outlook and philosophy; she effectively balanced the realities of growing old with many possibilities, an approach as relevant today as it was 34 years ago.

In other instances older adults have formed a vital part of wider protest movements, often with radical approaches towards political change. During the 1960s older adults played a visible and active role in rallies on nuclear disarmament. More recently older adults have joined anti-war demonstrations and ‘occupy’ protests. Their involvement may be more pronounced, however, in environmental and conservation causes. Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick (1986) argue that older adults are naturally conservationists and that their ‘long memories and wider perspectives lend urgency to the maintenance of the natural world’ (p. 334). According to Erikson’s life-course model, older adults in mastering ‘generativity’ are able to display a unique interest in the welfare of successive generations. As a result older adults may naturally be drawn to support causes relating to social justice, human rights and environmental sustainability.

11 Dementia

Often described as a condition devoid of meaning and entailing social death, dementia challenges fundamental assumptions about meaning-making in later life (Kitwood 1992). Indeed, the condition seems to attack components of the self which are essential for meaning-making: memory, language, interpersonal relations and abstract thinking. Given its growing incidence there have been some attempts to understand what dementia actually means to the individual, but clearly more work is required. This section outlines some models proposed for understanding the meaning of dementia, and its significance for broader debates on the meaning of later life.

Many studies of dementia focus on care services and the impact of dementia on family members. The needs of those living with dementia and their carers have received much of the attention. From the late 1980s studies examining dementia behaviour began to uncover the meanings behind particular behaviour patterns (see, for example, Shomaker 1987). Recently, scholars have turned to personhood to examine what dementia means.

In spite of the association between dementia and a lack of subjective meaning, Holst and Hallberg (2003, p. 359) argue that ‘people with dementia are capable of experiencing a sense of self’, noting that earlier studies of dementia centred on fears of losing control and feeling lost. Sabat and Harré (1992) also claim that an individual with dementia is able to maintain a sense of the self but like Kitwood (1995) they suggest that such meaning may rely on the presence and support of significant

others. This reinforces the notion that social relationships are vital for maintaining a sense of self and personhood for all older adults (Kitwood 1998).

Drawing on clinical and social psychology, Bender and Cheston (1997) propose a three-stage model to explore the subjective experiences of people with dementia. Their model develops three main aspects: the emotions associated with dementia; behaviour responses to decline; and the social nature and context of emotional behaviours. Bender and Cheston conclude that the ability to express emotions, and thus perhaps maintain one of the sources of subjective meaning, 'is contingent upon the social context ... and ... level of cognitive functioning' (1997, p. 529). It appears that the social context of dementia—less studied than biomedical factors—deserves further examination. Since it seems difficult to separate the two dimensions, bringing them into a single frame, as Kitwood's dialectics of dementia suggests (1997), seems to be the most logical step. In fact Kitwood reveals that they are inseparable. Along these lines Kitwood (1997) proposes an 'involutionary spiral' to illustrate how personhood in those with dementia is undermined.

To describe the dialectical interplay between neurological impairment (NI) and malignant social psychology (MSP), Kitwood uses a specific case study with real-life events, which reveals how MSP can contribute to or speed up neurological impairment. It is thus possible to see how MSP may be a key factor in undermining the personhood of dementia sufferers. Yet, by the same token, it is also possible to conceive of ways to *enhance* the personhood of people with dementia. This enhancement is best achieved by remedying the malignant social psychology.

In another model Kitwood and Bredin (1992) use the frozen/fluid construct to explain how a person's personality is fixed (or frozen) during late childhood and generally persists in this state for the rest of their life. It may return to a fluid state depending on the degree of intersubjectivity, such as that attained through intimate friendship and love, and allow 'new ways of being' to be developed—for the person to grow and change.

By adding a third state—shattered—Kitwood and Bredin (1992) adapt the model to describe personhood for those with dementia. In relation to dementia and/or psychotic breakdown they state: 'It is as if the ice block has been broken up into fragments, without the melting that could enable a new synthesis' (p. 276). Dementia is positioned at the most extreme end of the shattered state, on par with psychosis, and corresponding with the lowest level of intersubjectivity.

While this presents a fairly debilitating and depressing picture, it is not the end of the story. Encouraging higher levels of intersubjectivity through interpersonal activities may mitigate the effects of the 'shattered' state. This has implications in a number of settings, since depression and burn-out potentially affect a large number of older adults. As Kitwood and Bredin state:

Everyday life continues by maintaining individuals in a relatively frozen state; its way of being positively requires it, even though the cost to personal well-being is immense. A more desirable form of life would be one in which there was vastly more intersubjectivity, and where there would be a continuing opportunity for people to be fluid; or, to alter the image, to grow and change (1992, p. 277).

Thus, the model may apply, in varying degrees, to older adults in general, explaining personality development through the relationships that people forge and maintain.

game ended for each player upon reaching the retirement square—now an important life stage—though the winner was still the one with the most money.

Later versions of *The Game of Life*



13 Conclusions

This study has identified a number of life course models from different disciplines and areas of life and determined the meanings ascribed to late life within each. The focus has been on cultural values and culturally-specific systems of understanding older age. It has deliberately drawn attention away from the dominant models of ageing to discuss alternative cultural models, in order to appreciate how individuals may relate to and utilise multiple frameworks of meaning. This provides the preliminary work necessary for understanding the cultural dynamics of demographic change.

This cultural focus has come at a cost, however. Cultural values proved vital in representing the value individuals and groups attach to older age. By the same token, they proved less effective in explaining negative attitudes towards ageing and older age. Moreover, cultural ideals do not always match social reality. While cultural values may reflect a reverence for older age this does not necessarily correlate with the social opportunities available to older adults within a given cultural system. Time and space constraints did not permit a closer investigation of the relationship between cultural values and social practice, though this is an area that needs further exploration. What can be inferred is that models that are capable of integrating competing, often conflicting values about older age, and accommodating the positive and negative aspects of the ageing experience, might shape a more supportive social environment for older adults. Many commentators feel that the dominant models of ageing cannot hold competing values of older age in creative tension (see Cole 1992) and that they obscure sources of meaning rather than enabling them. Observations made on the absence of rituals, rites of passage and ceremonies in later life deserve examination, and could further illuminate the meanings of ageing in contemporary society.

This study, while selective, has revealed that there are multiple sources to support meaning and purpose in later life. It is thus hoped that readers will identify where additional models, information and services are needed to truly represent diversity in later life. What remains a persistent challenge is how sources of meaning can be translated into real opportunities through policy and service development. This should encourage rather than stifle further debate and inquiry.

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