

Identity, well-being into and beyond retirement

Activity, Unpaid Work and Active Ageing
ESRC Rethinking Retirement seminar series
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Research into the meanings and sources of well-being from older people's perspectives

- ❑ Collaborative: academic researchers, Age Concern manager and older people working together to design and carry out the research.
- ❑ Enabling research participants to define the issues important to them.
- ❑ Developing a research process based on an ethic of care framework (Ward and Gahagan 2010).
- ❑ Semi-structured one-to-one interviews with 30 people aged between 67 – 97 (fifteen were 85 + and five were 90+); 6 focus group with further 59 participants



Rethinking Retirement and Active Ageing

- ‘well-being’ rather than ‘activity’ as the starting point and frame
- ‘beyond’ retirement:
 - not a ‘one-off’ event
 - a long period of time
 - encompassing a whole range of transitions
 - not just from ‘paid work’ to ‘not work’



Introducing some of our participants

In their 70s ...

Susan 74, divorced and returned to UK 10 years ago after living abroad

Jennifer 76, full-time carer for husband

In their 80s ...

Ruby 84, lives with husband

Richard 89 and his wife Agnes 86

In their 90s ...

Jacob 97, lives with wife who is 90

Ethel 96, widowed and lives alone in sheltered housing



activity

The negotiation of both 'new' activities and the giving up or doing differently 'old' ones:

- Finding activities that give continuity – interests, values that have always been important
- Finding new ways to do cherished activities – making adjustments
- Finding activities that can still be done
- Who do you do things with?



I have always been a passionate gardener, from childhood actually. Well, it is certainly the garden I love, and I would be very loathe to leave it. I have often thought, well, you have got to face it cos I am so limited in some of the things I can do that we have got to give it up but I should very much miss it. And so consequently I garden indoors, I have got a very good window that likes orchids.

[Agnes 86]



it's extremely restricted from what it was three years ago when we used walk on the Downs, ride our bikes, go to theatres and films and foreign holidays, none of that's possible anymore so we, we lead a very parochial life now. I try to think of things to do, yesterday we went to have a look at the new exhibition of photographs on the seafront ...[husband] couldn't quite manage to walk there so he sat in the shelter so he could see where I was and I went and had a look at the photographs... Then afterwards we had a little picnic in the park, because we are very fortunate in that we have a blue badge, that's absolutely a godsend.

And as the deterioration only gets worse, there's less you can plan and less you can do.

[Jennifer, 76 full-time carer]



Identity work

Changes that can impact on people's sense of identity:

- Negotiating new roles
- Reversal of roles:
 - From care giver to care receiver
 - Traditional gender roles within relationship
- Becoming a carer
- Finding continuity- connections with who you have always been
- Dealing with loss of identity



embodiment

Negotiating physical and bodily change

Your body adapts and you adapt, because you haven't got the energy... I used to love playing tennis and in the place which we lived here, and you'd think you'd be fearfully upset but no, your body tells you, you can't do that anymore. ..But it doesn't stop my well being, but just not being able to rush around like I used to and go for as long walks and that sort of thing, and I can't swim in the sea anymore because of the stones, if it was a sandy beach, I probably could still swim... but I'm not as keen as I used to be on swimming, I used to go five days a week but I don't now because I don't any longer swim and garden on the same day, I think that's asking too much.

Ruby (both knees and hip replaced)



So now I have the worry of if I'm going out I've got to take those Imodium...I don't take them all the time but ... I'm so scared of being on the bus coming backwards and forwards.... I'm so scared, I pad myself up, buy these things, buy something else, wear this, that and the other in case it happens. It's a horrible thing ... if it happened, what would happen if I was in a taxi? I mean it's a dread, so that restricts me unless I know I've been alright for two or three days... but I've had to think about it and of course it keeps you awake at night and I think "oh supposing I'm in a taxi, what would I do? Oh" and I'm getting all worked up. It hasn't happened, I think well don't think about it but you do because of your age you see.

[Ethel, 96]



relationships

- Changes in relationships:
 - Related to care needs both own or as a carer
 - Related to health
- Loss of relationships:
 - Bereavement and widowhood
 - Outliving friends and peers
- Activities and relationships
- Identity and relationships:
 - Significance of care within relationships and ambivalence about this



The 'work' of old age

- Ongoing processes of change and adaptation over a long period
- Not just by older people but all of us
- Capacity to do this 'work' and be well in old age shaped by the resources and extent of 'supportive culture'
- Learning to be 'well enough'



Emotional labour

- Learning to ask for and accept help
- Responding to changes in close relationships
- Dealing with a sense of declining visibility, and lack recognition of own strengths, experience and identity



Organisational labour

- Everyday planning for daily living tasks – routes to shops, use of services, availability of public toilets and seating
- ‘Bigger’ planning and decision making- difficult decisions around moving from home or going into residential care



In conclusion

- Old age is not just about giving up paid work but requires 'work' to be 'well enough'
- Losses can reduce resources but also adaptation can generate resources
- Well-being cannot be achieved solely through activity
- Well-being is not restricted to those who are very active
- A good old age requires action by all of us



References

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