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Voices of the Well-Elderly: A Qualitative Study of Psychological Strengths and Well-Being

Emma E Kirkby-Geddes¹ and Ann Macaskill²

The aim of this study is to explore positive aspects of ageing. Specifically, examining the psychological strengths of optimism, hope, gratitude, forgiveness and curiosity and focusing on participants' experiences of what is uniquely good about later life in a sample of elderly people living independently in the community. Research on psychological strengths is largely quantitative but this study provides ecological validity to the concept of psychological strengths in well older adults. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) eight in-depth individual interviews undertaken with well adults aged between 65 and 85 years old were analyzed. A cross-case analysis identified four major themes and a number of sub-themes: Psychological Strengths (Lay Descriptions of Strengths, Examples of Strengths); Benefits of old age (Choice and Freedoms, Enjoyable activities, Resources); Relationships (Friendships, Family, Self); Attitudes to getting older (Debating the age label, Attitudes informed by media). The psychological strengths of gratitude, curiosity and optimism were very apparent in the narratives while forgiveness was less prevalent and hope was not a character strength used by the participants in their descriptions of ageing. The study addresses the absence of the voices of older adults in research. In addition, this qualitative study augments the existing quantitative evidence base for positive psychology.

Keywords: psychological strengths, older adults, well-elderly, qualitative research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The exponential increase in older people living longer is a demographic trend across the developed world, in addition, scientists predict average life expectancy will increase to 85-87 years by 2050 (Wilmoth, 2000). This changing nature of ageing provides the context for this study: as the lifespan increases, people will spend a proportionately longer period of their lives as older adults perhaps working. Governments recognize the benefits of promoting old age as a time of active engagement rather than passive decline (Cracknell, 2010). Being well is more necessary for older adults to meet the demands of work. Therefore, understanding the determinants of ageing-well is pertinent. Though the impact of socio-economic factors such as poverty and loneliness cannot be ignored; these variables do not account for all the variance in people's experiences of health and well-being (Demakakos & Steptoe, 2010). Studies have shown positive relationships between good mental and physical health. For example, positive affect has been linked to longevity (Kawamoto & Doi, 2002); as protection against the occurrence of infectious diseases (Cohen, Doyle, Turner, Cuneyt, & Skoner, 2003); whilst the absence of positive affect has been shown to affect future occurrences of strokes in older adults (Ostir, Markides, Peek, & Goodwin, 2001). Positive psychology, the science of human strengths and flourishing, has also provided evidence of the importance of psychological strengths to well-being in old age (Isaacowitz, 2005; Ranzijin, 2002; Stirling, 2010). There have been some studies examining factors that affect thriving in old age but this is in nursing home populations (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2008). However, very little research exists about thriving and well-being of older people living independently in the community.

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Rationale and Study Aims

The psychogerontological literature mainly focuses on decline in old age, painting a negative picture. An over-arching aim of this study is to address this imbalance by exploring positive aspects of ageing. Firstly, coming from a positive psychology paradigm which examines how to promote well-being in individuals and communities, the study focuses on exploring psychological strengths in a well-elderly population living independently in the community. The psychological strengths chosen are optimism, hope, gratitude, forgiveness and curiosity, as a literature review identified robust evidence that these strengths have a positive relationship to well-being (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Secondly, the study focuses firmly on the well-elderly and explores their experiences of what is uniquely good about later life. It is sadly the case that those who thrive in old age are largely invisible from popular discourses about what it means to be old. Indeed, the well-elderly are under-researched (Gergen & Gergen, 2001; Ranzijn, 2002) and there is disparity between how researchers and older adults describe concepts such as successful ageing; with older people's definitions being unsurprisingly complex and multi-dimensional (Bowling, 2006; Ferri, James, & Pruchno, 2009) where researchers tend to describe successful aging as the absence of physical disease symptoms (Rowe & Khan, 1997). This indicates that research must be informed more directly by the experiences and interests of older people. Bowling and Iliffe (2006) found lay models of successful ageing were better predictors of quality of life than the uni-dimensional ones used in many surveys. Positive psychology has traditionally emphasized quantitative methods rarely including the voices of its participants. Hence the necessity for qualitative research so that the voices of older people in research are present. In a recent review, it was found that only 11% of studies exploring positive psychology were qualitative in design (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2014). By asking participants about their experiences of the role of psychological strengths addresses this deficiency. This qualitative study seeks to answer the question: How do the well-elderly experience well-being and what role do psychological strengths play in enjoying later life.

Design and Method

A qualitative design was used to explore participants' views on being well-elderly and the role psychological strengths played in this. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) was chosen because it places the participant's subjective experience centre stage, allowing for a rich description of actual lived experience. The aim of IPA is to capture participants experiences of life by letting them talk. The researcher carefully examines these reported experiences, reflects on the perceptions and assumptions that underpin these experiences and finally interprets the experiences. It is this process of participants interpreting their experiences to report them and then the researcher interpreting the participants' interpretations that Smith et al. (2012) call the double-hermeneutic and it is a defining characteristic of IPA.

Reliability and Validity

IPA is an interpretative approach which, like qualitative research designs generally are criticized for lacking validity and reliability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Following Ritchie and Lewis (2005), validity and reliability in this study were ensured through transparency in the analysis process and by engaging in the research as a reflective practitioner. This was

achieved by keeping a reflexive log of issues that arose for the researcher during the research and in conscious reflection about interpretations made of the participant's account. In terms of transparency a sample of the interview transcripts and the final themes were checked by another researcher, and discussion ensued until agreement was reached.

As mentioned earlier, old age is generally described negatively as involving loss and decline so it was considered crucial to try to avoid focusing on the negative stereotypes of ageing in the interviews and uncover what was positive about the experience. For these reasons the interview schedule was informed by Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI emphasizes positive consideration of research topics which may invite and evoke negative experiences, such as ageing. While four phases of AI exist, they can be used separately or in combinations depending on the context of the research (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). In this study, the Discovery and Dreaming phases were used. As such, the questions in the interview instead of identifying the problems of ageing pose questions focused on “Discovery” of the best aspects of experience, for example: “Tell me about feelings of potential and growth at this time in your life?” In the Dreaming phase participants were given a vignette describing a universe where ageing was perceived to be wonderful and asked to describe what this would be like and how people would think and feel. It captures the sense of what the ideal would be for the elderly.

Participants

Recruitment was through the University of the Third Age (U3A), which is a global organization dedicated to life-long learning in the over 50s, and runs rather like a club. It rents venues for local meetings and a committee organizes activities and members pays subscriptions. Participants were self-selecting as well-elderly and all lived independently in the community in their own homes. They participated in an in-depth face-to-face interview for approximately one hour. Ethical approval for the study was given by a university Research Ethics Committee. Purposive sampling was adopted to find eight individuals (four men and four women). Table 1 below shows the ages, gender, profession and marital status of the participants and the codes used in the analysis. The data was collected between September and November 2012.

Table 1

Showing Purposive Sample Based on Gender and Age, Profession and Marital Status

	Age 65 – 70	Age 71- 75	Age 76 – 80	Age 80 - 86
Male	(M66) Age: 66 Retired business-owner Married	(M74) Age: 74 Retired Senior Manager Social Care Married	(M79) Age: 79 Retired Senior Manager Industry Married	(M86) Age: 86 Retired Doctor Widower
Female	(F69) Age: 69 Retired Doctor Widow	(F72) Age: 72 Business-owner Single	(F80) Age: 80 Retired Teacher Widow	(F81) Age: 81 Retired business owner Widow

Data Analysis

Verbatim transcripts of the eight interviews were uploaded to NVivo a specialist software that allows a researcher to organise and code interview data prior to and during analysis. Analysis of the eight interviews then followed the steps outlined by Willig (2008) for IPA. Step 1 - each transcript was subjected to three initial noting procedures: description (a summary of what was said) linguistic (e.g., use of metaphors); conceptual/reflexive (e.g., bracketing by researcher) notes. Step 2 - initial themes were identified based on grouping together similar concepts and topics covered by the participant then re-examined to understand any connections between these initial/emergent themes. Cross-case analysis was then undertaken using the same iterative comparative procedure to identify themes from each of the eight case studies till a final categorisation emerged. This was then checked and discussed with a second researcher although initial consensus was high.

Results and Discussion

The themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

A Summary of the Emergent Themes in the Cross-Case Analysis

Cross Case Themes Summary	
Theme # 1	Psychological Strengths
Sub-theme #1	Lay descriptions of strengths
Sub-theme #2	Examples of strengths
Theme #2	Attitudes to getting older
Sub-theme #1	Debating the Age Label
Sub-theme # 2	Attitudes informed by media and life experiences
Theme #3	Benefits of being older
Sub-theme #1	Choice and Freedoms
Sub-theme #2	Being engaged in enjoyable activities
Sub-theme #3	Resources: Financial
Theme # 4	Relationships
Sub-theme #1	Friendships
Sub-theme #2	Family
Sub-theme # 3	The Self

Theme # 1 Psychological Strengths

Sub theme # 1: Lay descriptions of strengths. Participants' descriptions of their strengths were conceptually close to those in the positive psychology literature. This provides much needed ecological validity to strengths research, which was shaped largely with reference to theory (Peterson and Seligman 2004). For example, the strength of curiosity is evident in language such as “interested in things” (F69); “creative” (F72); “analytical” (M66); “non-conformist” (M66). In addition to the dynamic nature of many of the strengths, their pro-social nature was echoed in the self-descriptions such as being “compassionate” (F69);

“careful with other’s feelings” (F81); “accepting” (M66); “easy to get on with” (M79); “a good listener” (M74); “empathy” (F72); “positive” (F80).

Sub-theme 2: Examples of strengths. All participants felt that being grateful was key to well-being. Gratitude was expressed at a number of levels (including being physically well; and for living in a first world country) but unequivocally it was to people close to the participants that participants were grateful. M74 who was dealing with the loss of his wife to dementia says of gratitude, “I think it's part of me, it's just acceptance that I've been fortunate. Fortunate firstly, in meeting the right girl and having a very happy marriage”. When talking of recent debilitating illness, F72 stresses her gratitude for friends and her local community who supported and helped her through difficulties, “ I am enormously grateful certainly, to a lot of what I get from my friends, my close friends, enormously, and I appreciate it phenomenally, and I am incredibly lucky”.

Gratitude appears to be an important trait in savouring life. Curiosity was also key to many accounts and this is experienced in a number of ways and contexts. Being older did not appear to diminish a love of the new and a sense that there was still plenty to discover in life. Some were curious about world affairs (M66); others about the importance of working and creating (F72); others about seeing what’s out there by travelling and some by their own engagement with life’s questions (F69). Curiosity was a strength that most participants were keen to explore in the interviews, unlike hope which received little attention from participants. For many being curious was considered to be an integral part of feeling well and engaged with life. Many expressed that they had always been curious and that in older age they had no intention of this ending. M86 the oldest participant expresses this well, “I'm curious about everything...you mustn't give up on life...you've got to do things and so I'm thinking, what else can I do next what other new things can I do next”.

Optimism too was expressed by many as an important strength, an enduring trait that was integral to how they see themselves: M86 says “[Well, I’m an eternal] optimist” and M74 says: “a half full man rather than a half empty man”. Forgiveness is discussed by four of the participants and what is clear is that of all the strengths, forgiveness can be the most difficult trait to enact. M74 says:

“Forgiveness I'm not always good at that...I can get on with things but there are times when I ought to be able I feel I ought to be more forgiving than I am. There are some things that happen that I find it hard to forgive” (M74, p. 25, line 36-37).

M86 adds that he does forgive and like F72 feels that keeping hold of anger detracts from enjoyment in one’s own life:

“It's gone, it's gone. I don't think you can hold grudges against people all your life. I mean you'd be thinking about it people do, but I mean, it's you know you ruin you ruin, I think it detracts from your own life.” (M86, p.33, lines 1-6)

It appears that goal directed dynamic traits such as optimism and hope differed in their salience for the well-elderly; optimism was discussed by most participants as important to feeling well, yet hope was barely mentioned. This could be indicative of changes in goal priorities with age (Carstensen & Charles, 1998); with optimism a more enduring

dispositional trait whereas hope is perhaps more vulnerable to life's vicissitudes. It is the pro-social trait of gratitude that appears the greatest salience for the participants and was clearly important to them in feeling well. Forgiveness another pro-social trait showed itself to be a more complex endeavour for the participants perhaps indicative of the ability of older adults to deal with greater complexity in their emotions (Palgi, Shrira, Ben-Ezra, Cohen-Fridel, & Bodner, 2011).

Theme # 2: Attitudes to Getting Older

Sub-theme # 1: Debating the Age Label. Most participants struggled to identify themselves happily with the labels that commonly describe old people, including the word 'old'. F80 says, "But I mean you can be old without being elderly, if you know what I mean...I admit to being old, but I hope that I'm not old or elderly in outlook". "Old" and "elderly" were perceived to be pejorative terms which did not fit the identities that the interviewees held for themselves. This theme may be indicative of a disparity between the limited and negative identities that are available in terms such as old and elderly with the actual lived experience of being old. The centrality of language in shaping experience has been explored in old age by Phelan (2010). Her analysis of the language used in Western cultures around ageing showed that language is steeped in ageist assumptions and gives clues as to why our participants find the labels applied to being an older adult hard to accept. 'Elderly' and even 'old' have become synonymous with frailty and dependence; with no words to act as positive labels. Words are key in shaping identity, if the old have no positive words to describe themselves and only words available are pejorative, then it is arguably difficult to be positive about being old. In fact participants when asked for better words to describe this time in life acknowledged that this was difficult to do. F81's response for example is typical: "that's a difficult one just off the top of your head I can't honestly off the top of my head I have to say".

Sub-theme#2: Attitudes informed by media and life experiences. The media and society more widely are also sources for ideas about what it is to be old. M66 talks of his views being ignored by those in his social group,

"When you get older you're not really seen by people, younger people, quite often...umm you know they look through you...and many is the time that you are your world view is not listened to."

F81 talks of her experience of being older as largely a positive experience until she engages with the media's negative portrayal of the elderly,

"Well at the moment I'm quite happy where I am I but you only have to pick up a newspaper or watch a programme or speak to somebody like you to bring them to the surface".

Arguably it is time for positive images and ideas about ageing to be more actively promoted.

Theme 3: Benefits of Being Older

Sub-theme #1 Choice and Freedoms. Commonly participants felt that what was unique about this time in their lives was a sense of freedom from the routine of work and to

develop valued activities. F69 expresses this, “having time to read... exploring ideas, and people’s ideas on the world, on the meaning of life”. Choice and freedom was key for M74, when asked about the best things about being older, “Gosh, I think it comes down to freedom again, it comes down to choosing, you know? Somebody says do you fancy being captain, and I say, not really”.

Subtheme 2: Being engaged in enjoyable activities. It was important for participants to be engaged in enjoyable activities as a mainstay of daily experiences, evidenced by active involvement in the U3A. As F80 said, “It’s waking up each day and looking forward to what you’re doing that day... having things to look forward to”.

Subtheme: Resources Financial - Underpinning this sense of freedom and choice for participants was the benefit of having the financial security of a private pension. For example, F80 states, “I can afford to do all the things that I want to do, I mean I don’t have way out taste, but I have a good life”. Financial security allows the participants to cultivate interests and hobbies and to have greater freedom and choice.

Theme 3: Relationships

Sub-theme Friendships. For F80 friendships are key to her well-being and her church group have provided her with much needed support after the death of her husband; whereas for her, family relationships appear to be sometimes fraught, of friendships she say,

“With friends now we all know our limitations that we know we’re getting older but we can enjoy life as much and we can laugh at the things that we can’t do now that we still can’t do”.

This too was echoed by M74 for whom friends had taken on a special significance now that his children might emigrate to Australia. His closest friends were facing a similar dilemma and this made the friendship closer; like F80, M74 feels that friends as peers are able to fully understand and empathise with the changing nature of life as he ages. Participation in wider social networks was central to all. For example, M79 organises social events where he lives; M86 hosts the U3A opera society in his house; F72 is an active eco-campaigner in her village; F69 is the editor of a magazine; F81 set up a branch of the U3A; M74 developed a handbook for new members of the bowls club and so on.

Subtheme # 2 Family. Spousal relationships were important with many participants in partnerships that have lasted their entire adult lives. Those who were widowed did convey that although physically absent, the influence of a lifelong partnership was an important touchstone for living life today. For example, M79 still refers to decisions that he makes using the term “we” indicating that his wife’s influence is still very important to him despite her physical and emotional absence from him. In M74’s account he describes his wife as a “brilliant deputy” and like many of the participants his account of life in older age was always in reference to his significant other and their welfare. Grandchildren too were key to all accounts and provide pleasure, with participants being actively involved in their grandchildren’s lives, with regular and welcome contact. F72’s account of her grand-daughter is typical in conveying the warmth of feelings for grandchildren,

"Yes, really of actually developing a love for her which I hadn't sort of expected...because it's not like having a child, which is a different, you know, where loving your child is not really unexpected".

This account also alludes to an aspect found in other accounts that their way of relating to grandchildren was markedly different from how they dealt with their own children when they were young.

Sub-theme 3: The Self. Participants also talked about a shift in how they saw themselves and how they experienced the world. Many cited freedom from obligation to others, a sense of liberation to be more themselves. This was expressed in the context of friendships. M66 states, "But the other thing about old age is you don't care anymore, you don't care what people think and so you're not trying to impress anybody anymore".

The changing nature of relationships in older adults both to others and the self is found in the literature. In terms of relationships to others, Socioemotive Selectivity Theory (Carstensen & Charles, 1998) proposes that due to increased chronological age and therefore a more limited time horizon to death, a re-evaluation of social and emotional priorities and goals takes place. SST proposes that as we get older we prefer to have a smaller number of quality relationships over a large number of acquaintances (Carstensen & Charles, 1998). This is partially supported by the participant accounts with many of them re-evaluating friendship and family ties often with a reduction in the number of friendships based on the quality of those friendships. However, what is significant about this group of older adults is that they play a central role in maintaining a wider social network often leading activity groups based on their own interests. This suggests rather than a narrowing of social relationships there is also an expansion of social ties but which are based around activities that are felt to be interesting.

Concluding Discussion

This study has shown the importance of giving voice to older adults and their experience of well-being and the role psychological strengths play in well-being. It provides rich descriptions particularly of the role of curiosity and gratitude as important for enjoying old age. The study provides insights into lay understandings of psychological strengths adding a level of ecological validity to this research area; while most psychological strengths research comes from a positivist paradigm using survey methods, it has been recognised that our understanding of psychological strengths must be constantly appraised for relevance and ecological validity (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). Therefore lay accounts and descriptions of psychological strengths provide an important part of the expansion of the positive psychology knowledge base. The study also evidences that older people must be more actively involved in research, so that research undertaken in their name is truly reflective and respectful of their experiences (Green, 1993). As seen here, researchers need to be mindful that even the words used to describe later life, are likely to carry negative connotations which do not fit with how older people feel about themselves. Participants dislike the terms 'elderly' and 'old'. Many positive aspects of being older are identified; a sense of freedom to choose what to do each day, freedom from the strictures of work and being involved in activities that maintained intellectual activity. Paradoxically, well-being whilst about freedom and choice afforded by

not working is about active engagement with life and structured activity. Relationships were important particularly peer-friendships, spouses and grandchildren which provided valued support based on shared experiences of the challenges and tribulations of ageing. The longevity of many of these relationships makes them unique and special. The importance of relatedness to well-being has been documented (Smith & Christakis, 2008). Our participants discussed emotional changes in relation to themselves. They report a greater tolerance for disapproval from others and a resultant sense of emotional freedom

Limitations and Further Research.

The sample were all white, well- educated, and economically secure and so to address the generalizability of these findings the study should be replicated with samples from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. In terms of methodology, while IPA proved to be useful approach here, it is sometimes criticised for being highly reliant on obtaining rich data from participants to describe their experiences (Willig, 2008). The educational level and eagerness of participants to contribute ensured that rich data was forthcoming. The focus is on subjective experience and when considering concepts such as well-being this seems an appropriate approach as the individual is the expert on their well-being. In conclusion, the study aimed to understand the experience of psychological strengths in old age and what is good about being old, by giving a voice to older adults themselves, thus making a valuable contribution to the literature examining the positive aspects of being an older adult.

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