

Successful Ageing: By Whose Definition?

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PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM THIS THESIS

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Conference Presentations:

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McCann Mortimer, P., Ward, L., & Winefield, H. (2007). Successful Ageing Defined: The Truth is out There Somewhere. Poster presented at 6th Emerging Researchers in Ageing Conference: Defining future direction, Adelaide, S.A. Winner: Best Poster Award

McCann Mortimer, P. (2005). 'Successful Ageing: By Whose Definition?' Paper presented at SA Gerontology Conference. 8th Conjoint Scientific Meeting, Adelaide, S.A.

McCann Mortimer, P. (2005). Older Women's Views of Ageing and Well-being. Paper presented at Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR), South Australian Branch Scientific Meeting, Adelaide, South Australia.

ABSTRACT

Current mainstream models of successful ageing have received criticism in the literature, especially Rowe and Kahn's (1987) model, the most widely accepted theory of successful ageing in gerontology. A key aim for the present study is to challenge the key mainstream theories of successful ageing. This thesis asks whether the dominant perspectives on successful ageing can be challenged by directly consulting older women about how they see the roles of religion and spirituality in ageing well and by unpacking specific problems identified in the literature. Criticisms include the lack of consultation with older people by successful ageing researchers. A second issue is the negative way that the last phase of life, or 'Fourth Age' (Laslett, 1989), is represented in successful ageing theories and also in the field of gerontology and society generally. The leading models of successful ageing from Rowe and Kahn and Baltes and Baltes (1990) postulate that successful ageing is contingent on certain capacities and that successful ageing comes to an end when health and good functioning, or the capacity to employ adaptive strategies, fails. Hence life in very old age is represented as a picture of loss and decline with no positive prospects. A third criticism relates to the lack of inclusion of religious and spiritual affiliations which may be important resources for psychological, spiritual, and existential well-being, particularly during the final phase of life. This issue is investigated with participants identified as both spiritual and religious (SR) and as spiritual only and not religious (SO). Some researchers have argued that women do not age as well as men and that older women are usually less financially well off and in poorer health than their male counterparts, across all levels of socio-economic status (Greene, 2003; Smith

& Baltes, 1998). The views of women were sought in order to contribute to balancing the gender scales of ageing well. The focus in this research is on the views of women who are in midlife or older on successful ageing. The research design, of mixed models, used qualitative data derived from focus groups and in-depth individual interviews supplemented by quantitative data gained from surveys. Three broad central themes encompassing participants' views on successful ageing were identified. Most participants viewed life as a journey of growth and development and for some this extended beyond poor health and functioning. Autonomy was valued by most participants. Relationships were also important, and nearly all participants gained much personal satisfaction from generative activities, consistent with the literature. Some participants provided examples of successful ageing occurring in the final stages of life or 'Fourth Age' (Laslett, 1989). A number regarded the current options for frail aged accommodation and end-of-life care with fear and dread. These findings point to the need for researchers and policy makers to listen carefully to the voices of ageing people. Based on participants' comments there is a need for informed and tailored changes to be made in policy, planning, physical accommodation options, and, crucially, to the training of those who work with older people. The development of more positive 'whole of life theories' of successful ageing is urgently required in order to counterbalance the dominant, negative perspectives on the final phase of life.

STUDENT CERTIFICATE

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

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Date

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