

EUR Research Information Portal

A peer-led senior health education programme

Published in:

Successful ageing, spirituality and meaning

Publication status and date:

Published: 01/01/2010

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for the published version (APA):

Voorham, T., & Kocken, P. (2010). A peer-led senior health education programme: An effect and process evaluation. In J. Bouwer (Ed.), *Successful ageing, spirituality and meaning: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 121-136). Peeters.

[Link to publication on the EUR Research Information Portal](#)

Terms and Conditions of Use

Except as permitted by the applicable copyright law, you may not reproduce or make this material available to any third party without the prior written permission from the copyright holder(s). Copyright law allows the following uses of this material without prior permission:

- you may download, save and print a copy of this material for your personal use only;
- you may share the EUR portal link to this material.

In case the material is published with an open access license (e.g. a Creative Commons (CC) license), other uses may be allowed. Please check the terms and conditions of the specific license.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this material infringes your copyright and/or any other intellectual property rights, you may request its removal by contacting us at the following email address: openaccess.library@eur.nl. Please provide us with all the relevant information, including the reasons why you believe any of your rights have been infringed. In case of a legitimate complaint, we will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website.

TITUS BRANDSMA INSTITUTE

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

Supplement 20

SUCCESSFUL AGEING, SPIRITUALITY
AND MEANING

Multidisciplinary Perspectives

edited by

J. Bower

English corrector: Helen-Anne Ross
With the help of Wendy Litjens



PEETERS

LEUVEN - PARIS - WALPOLE, MA

2010

CONTENTS

Introduction

- Successful ageing and spirituality 1
Johan Bouwer

Conceptualisation

- The early concept of successful ageing in gerontology 15
Kees Knipscheer
- The concept of spirituality 29
Hein Blommestijn

Gerontological perspectives

- Ageing as increasing vulnerability and complexity – Towards a philosophy of life course 39
Jan Baars
- Gerotranscendence: Successful contemplation in later life? – An empirical exploration among older adults in the Netherlands 53
Arjan Braam, Dorly Deeg, Theo van Tilburg, Aartjan Beekman & Willem van Tilburg

Psychological perspectives

- Personal meaning and successful ageing – A psychogerontological perspective 73
Gerben Westerhof
- Ways to wisdom: Life span, successful ageing and spirituality – An analysis based on 20 interviews 91
Frits Mertens

Sociological perspectives

- Ageing, health care and the spiritual imperative – A view from Scotland 109
Harriet Mowat

A peer-led senior health education programme – An effect and process evaluation <i>Toon Voorham & Paul Kocken</i>	121
Anthropological perspectives	
Shifting meanings of successful ageing – Anthropological reflections <i>Sjaak van der Geest, Margaret von Faber & Euan Sadler</i>	137
Misery, medicine and morality – Successful ageing and spirituality in South Africa <i>Els van Dongen (†)</i>	151
Moral perspectives	
Good ageing – A comprehensive approach <i>Frits de Lange</i>	171
Frailty and care <i>Frans Vosman & Andries Baart</i>	191
Theological perspectives	
Towards a practical theological perspective on (successful) ageing <i>Evert Jonker</i>	209
Forgetting whose we are – Theological reflections on successful ageing, personhood and dementia <i>John Swinton</i>	237
Bibliography	263
List of contributors	281

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST, MARGARET VON FABER & EUAN SADLER

SHIFTING MEANINGS OF SUCCESSFUL AGEING

Anthropological reflections

Introduction

What is successful ageing? How is “successful” connected to “ageing”? Should we regard the mere fact of reaching great age a success? Or does the concept refer to the quality of life one enjoys at a great age? Or do we call an older person successful because he/she does not look old, does not suffer from the symptoms of old age? In other words: are we successfully old if we are not “old,” as it were? Is “successful ageing” a denial of ageing?

Cultural anthropology is the study of difference. By comparing and contrasting, we are able to raise questions concerning assumptions that are taken for granted. What seems obvious to us starts shifting and becomes a contingency from the viewpoint of what is obvious to others. Applying this anthropological perspective, we aim to explore the various uses, notions and meanings of the concept of “successful ageing” in different cultural, political and social contexts. In this regard, it soon becomes clear that perceptions of “success” in old age may differ so much, that one could call its use a confusion in languages. Furthermore, we will argue that the change in the meanings of “successful ageing” depends very much on the specific interests of the various parties involved. The following contrasting contexts will be discussed: The Netherlands and Ghana, different audiences, policymakers versus older people themselves and different characters.

Before presenting our views, we wish to briefly discuss three aspects of the anthropological approach which differ from the more quantitative study of old age. The first one is the importance of *context*. Words and practices derive their meaning from the contexts in which they take place. Statements about old age, and successful ageing in particular, have to be studied within the situation in which they are made. The same words may have opposite meanings in specific contexts. “Successful” may even mean “unsuccessful,” for example when said in an ironic tone. Direct observation is therefore crucial in order to reach a plausible interpretation of our data.

This leads to the second characteristic: the anthropological objective is not about explaining in order to predict future development. Our ambition is “only” to understand, and to make sense out of what people say and do. Our main objective is to describe and to produce a convincing interpretation of what has been described. A convincing interpretation often implies “translating,” i.e. finding the words to elucidate meaning for an audience not familiar with the phenomenon.

The third aspect concerns “emic” (insider) and “etic” (outsider) perspectives. We are usually more interested in ideas *of* than in ideas *about* our informants. Trying to grasp people’s point of view has been an anthropological adage ever since Malinowski coined the terms. Those “people” can be the older people, or those who look after them, or the younger generation, or policy-makers. All these have – different – concerns and views regarding ageing. This interest in people’s own ideas follows the anthropological concepts of culture and agency. People are not objects at the mercy of the culture that encloses them; they produce their own ideas to locate themselves in, or resist, that culture. They are both objects and subjects of their history.

These theoretical starting points lead to a methodological approach in which the researcher derives his interpretation more from casual conversations than from formal interviews or structured questionnaires. Conversations are as much as possible complemented with participant observation, sharing experiences with those who are the “object” of the research. Sharing experiences further results in introspection: the awareness that one can only understand other people’s thoughts, practices and emotions through one’s own thoughts, practices and emotions. These theoretical and epistemological assumptions ultimately affect our interpretation of the different shades of “successful ageing.” Let us now first consider the meanings of the words “ageing” and “old” before exploring the meaning of *successful* ageing.

Through the ages people have thought about the value of old age as a phase of life and asked themselves whether this part of life is characterised by losses or gains. From a medical perspective, Hippocrates (400 BC) focused on old age and diseases.¹ In his *Rhetorica*, Aristotle emphasised the negative aspects of old age.² Cicero, on the other hand, wrote an essay on the nature of good ageing in his famous *Cato Maior de senectute*. Here, he argued that old age could be a phase of life with many possibilities for positive change and productivity. For

¹ G. Bennett & S. Ebrahim, *The essentials of health care of the elderly*, London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

² J.A. Munnichs, ‘Historische schets van de psychogerontologie’, in: J. Munnichs & G. Uildriks (Eds.), *Psychogerontologie*, Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1989, 11-22.

this reason, researchers who focus on successful ageing often refer to his positive perspective of old age.³

According to Fairhurst,⁴ ageing is amoral; in itself it is neither good nor bad. Ageing may change things for the better or for the worse. Some things may gain in value and taste as they mature or grow older, like cheese and wine; other things lose value through ageing, for example clothes or machines. Perceiving ageing as positive or negative is indeed a cultural construction. Why should one regard wrinkles as a sign of decay and loss of beauty while similar physical phenomena are called beautiful when they appear on trees, houses or furniture?

There is little in which cultures differ so much from each other than in the appreciation of old age. Anthropological and cross-cultural studies have addressed the question of old age from an *emic* point of view, seeking how contextual factors of a cultural setting shape the ways in which people conceptualise a good old age.⁵ Westerhof et al. describe the different perspectives related to old age between older people living in the United States, India and Congo/Zaire.⁶ For North American older people, good health together with the preservation of independence is their first priority. Congolese older people, on the other hand, emphasise the expected support of their children and the importance of a good death. Indian older people are somewhere between these two extremes but also attach much importance to a peaceful way of ending life.

In the rest of this article, we will focus on perceptions about old age in the Netherlands and Ghana. Ghanaians who visit the Netherlands are often shocked by the way the Dutch view old age and treat their older people. To them, it seems old age is not valued in The Netherlands, which in their perception is

³ See e.g. P.B. Baltes & M.M. Baltes, 'Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation', in: P.B. Baltes & M.M. Baltes (Eds), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 1-34.

⁴ E. Fairhurst, "Growing old gracefully" as opposed to "mutton dressed as lamb": The social construction of recognising older women', in: S. Nettleton & J. Watson (Eds), *The body in everyday life*, London/New York: Routledge, 1998, 258-275: 258.

⁵ Cf. J. Keith et al., 'Community as context for successful ageing', in: J. Sokolovsky (Ed.), *The cultural context of aging: Worldwide perspectives*, New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1990, 245-261; P. Collins, "If you got everything, it's good enough": Perspectives on successful ageing in a Canadian Inuit community', in: *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 16 (2001), 127-155; S. Torres, 'Understanding successful ageing in the context of migration: The case of Iranian immigrants in Sweden', in: *Ageing & Society* 21 (2001), 333-355.

⁶ G.J. Westerhof et al., 'Life contexts and health-related selves in old age: Perspectives from the United States, India and Congo/Zaire', in: *Journal of Aging Studies* 15 (2001), 105-126.

incomprehensible, undeserved and inhumane. Conversely, Dutch people are astonished by the taken-for-granted affluence of care and respect that surrounds older people in Ghana.

In the Netherlands, reaching old age is rarely perceived as something positive or enviable. Although there is a positive image of the “young-old” that depicts older people as active, financially well-off and having enough free time to enjoy life, the image of the oldest-old is mainly negative. High chronological age is associated with loss and decline in functioning and well-being. Dependency, loneliness, depression and cognitive decline are factors that are in general linked with advanced old age.⁷

In contrast, the research by Van der Geest in Ghana shows that old age is not always perceived as something negative.⁸ In the Twi language, spoken in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town where he conducted his research, there is no equivalent adjective to the English adjective “old,” at least not with regard to human beings. People use the verb *nyin* (“to grow”) for the state of being old. They will say about an older person: *wanyin* (“he/she has grown”). The verb *nyin* suggests a linear process. Life, certainly in this language, is not imagined as a cycle, a journey that ends the way it started (in total dependence), but as an ever-continuing development. To be “more grown” than someone else, therefore, implies having had more life experience, achieving wisdom, and indeed being more human. If older people refer to themselves as *manyin* (I have grown), it does not sound as a complaint seeking sympathy, but is rather said with a sense of boastful pride. In such a context, it seems natural to show respect to older people.

Interestingly, the verb *nyin* is used only for living creatures because they are capable of growing and developing. Objects like tools, houses, or cars lack this ability. These objects are perceived as perfect when they are new and start their decay the second day of their “life.” The adjective *dada* (old) indicates this process of decline and decay.

Successful ageing

Cultural variations

In Ghana, growing old is a development that is looked forward to. It is a time when a person can rest, and enjoy the respect and appreciation from those who take care of them and come to listen to their wisdom. To “have grown”

⁷ M. von Faber, *Maten van succes: Gezondheid, aanpassing en sociaal welbevinden bij ouderen. De Leiden 85-plus studie*, Rotterdam: Optima, 2002.

⁸ S. van der Geest, ‘Respect and reciprocity: Care of elderly people in rural Ghana’, in: *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 17 (2002) no. 1, 3-31.

is almost the same as being successful. There are four terms in Twi which are commonly used for people of old age. In the case of a man, these terms are: *panyin*, *akokora*, *akokora pòsòpòsò* and *nana*. For a woman these are: *òbaa pinyin*, *aberewa*, *aberewa pòsòpòsò* and *nana*. Old people themselves prefer the first term. An *panyin* – or for that matter *òbaa pinyin* – is an older person who still has vitality of mind and, to a certain extent, body. The term can best be translated as “elder” and has the connotation of wisdom and social importance. *Akokora* – or *aberewa* – is more associated with bodily – and mental – weakness as a result of advanced age. This association is even more explicit if the adjective *pòsòpòsò* (shaky, infirm) is added. *Nana* is again a very positive word, mostly used as a term of address, expressing respect. When Van der Geest asked an old man what indicates that someone is *panyin*, he replied:

You can see it in the wisdom he passes on to the young and in the way he respects himself. If you respect yourself, the young will also respect you and give you everything you need (...) An *panyin* does not drink, behaves well and shows respect to the young.

The proverbs that were discussed in conversations, all prompted consideration of the very positive qualities of older people. The most important ones were their wisdom and life experience, which enabled them to predict the future and to advise younger people. The fact that one has lived for a long time implies that one has seen a lot of things and understands how they are related, and why one event follows another. This wisdom enables the old person to foresee misfortune and tell people how they can prevent it from happening. According to one of the older people, the difference between them and young people is: “Wisdom, the capacity to think before acting. Young people just begin to act without thinking.” Such wisdom, as well as the capacity to look ahead, also endows the old person with power. That is why a proverb says *Ppanyin ano sen òbosom* (The mouth of an elder is stronger than God).

The *panyin* also has good manners that are rooted in self-restraint. He is in control of his emotions, he does not become angry and does not shout at people. This self-control is, for example, clearly visible in the way he deals with information or in his ascetic attitude. When a child hears new information, he/she spreads it immediately. A child cannot hold its tongue. An *panyin*, however, knows how to keep information confidential.

The *panyin*'s self-discipline also shows in his attitude to food, drink, sex and other material pleasures. Gluttony and greediness do no befit an older person, as one proverb remarks: *Ppanyin mpere kòm* (An *panyin* does not complain about hunger). One older person said: “If there is not enough food in the house, the *panyin* gives his portion to the children.” Another added:

We have a proverb, *ɔpanyin yam adwansae aduasa* (There are thirty sheep in the stomach of the *ɔpanyin*). You know it is your food but that child has nothing to eat. You tell him he can eat it. I can chew kola and get satisfied. The *ɔpanyin* has lived his life; he has eaten so much in this world. All he needs to do now is to look after his people in the house.

Wisdom, cautiousness, discipline and altruism are the main virtues of the older people (at least, in their own eyes). These virtues are held together by their dedication to the family (*abusua*). The *ɔpanyin* is concerned about only one thing: the well-being of the *abusua*. His life is drawing to an end and soon he will join the ancestors. There is no reason to worry about material things. Only his children and grandchildren count. One old man said:

An *ɔpanyin* should not travel or go and live somewhere else. He should stay at home and offer advice to the young. If there is a conflict in the house, he will reconcile the two parties. If an *ɔpanyin* goes to travel and live somewhere else, people will criticize him and call him a bad *ɔpanyin* (*ɔpanyin bofoɔ*). It is the duty of an *ɔpanyin* to stay at home, advise relatives and re-establish peace.

The well-being of the *abusua* is the touchstone of everything the *ɔpanyin* undertakes. Whatever he does, if it benefits the family, is good. His wisdom is meant for the *abusua*. His refusal to participate in rumours holds the family together. His unselfishness and patience set an example for others in the house. To be old, in the Ghanaian sense, is almost identical to being *successfully* old.

In the Netherlands, growing old is rather associated with loss and decline and not, as in Ghana, with reaping the fruits of earlier investments. In the Leiden 85-plus Study, Von Faber asked inhabitants of 85 years and older how they perceived “successful ageing.”⁹ For the Dutch respondents, successful ageing meant maintaining a feeling of well-being despite the losses that are perceived as inherent in growing old. Resilience, “making the best of it,” setting out new courses and inventing strategies to deal with declining social contacts and limitations in physical and cognitive functioning were perceived as important means to maintain a feeling of well-being. In this context, successful ageing sounds as an oxymoron; a person is successful *despite* being old. Successfulness is a victory over old age; those who do not complain about lost freedoms and beloved persons, who are able to maintain their good humour despite pain and problems, and who are able to maintain feelings of well-being, may consider themselves “successful,” as one man remarked:

I feel happy! What more is there to wish for? If you are this age and you feel happy?

⁹ Von Faber, *Maten van succes*.

The older people were aware of the contrast between their inner feelings and outer appearances. For outsiders, physical limitations may be a sign of unsuccessfulness. However, older people can feel successful because they feel content, even if health declines, as the comments of one married man below show:

Successful ageing is how happy you can be at this age. Of course health plays an important role, however, you can also feel happy within limits of health. If you consider successfulness as the same as good health, then you could say: everyone who is 85, 86, 87, and who is not in good shape is not successful. But there is more to it. It is not only health. It is a combination. You don't have any influence on your health, but in relationships with others, in holding on to social contacts and a feeling of connection to society, that is what you can have an effect on.

His wife agreed and added:

Our neighbour is fine, but he never makes contacts. When I walk down the corridor to pick up my newspaper I greet him, but he never answers. He is always lonely. We have never seen him together with anyone else. Although he is a real gentleman, in my opinion he is not successful.

Rather than physical limitations, being lonely is perceived as a sign of unsuccessfulness. Although health is important, it is not perceived as the most important element of successful ageing.

Political variations – Policy-makers versus older people

From a multi-level perspective, the meaning of a concept like successful ageing changes continuously. A multi-level perspective reveals the hidden discrepancies between stakeholders at different social and political levels.¹⁰ The contrasts in meaning are concealed because the same terms are used. A multi-level perspective departs from the assumption that different actors at various social or political levels have differing goals, which often shape *their* definitions and perceptions of these goals. Consequently, using one term for differing realities misleads and conceals conflicting interests. The concept of successful ageing serves as an example; do policy-makers, researchers and older people mean the same thing when they use this term?

Dutch policy-makers are putting increasing effort into dealing with the consequences of an ageing population. Although life-expectancy for both men and women has increased, the *healthy* life-expectancy (the number of years that will be spent in relatively good health) has not changed significantly.¹¹

¹⁰ S. van der Geest et al., 'Primary Health Care in a multilevel perspective: Towards a research agenda', in: *Social Science & Medicine* 30 (1990) no. 9, 1025-1034.

¹¹ Cf. D.L. Knook, 'Europe's ageing population and consequences for healthcare', in: R. Bok (Ed.), *Ageing in Europe*, Breda: Plantijn Casparie, 1999, 19.

Policy-makers anticipate that an increase in life-expectancy that is not accompanied by a proportionate increase in healthy years will lead to a greater rise in health care costs. Therefore, the Dutch government is interested in “successful” older people. Policy makers want to understand why and how some older people maintain a good health and do not need medical or other care. Knowledge of such determinants of successful ageing could thus lead to cost-reducing measures. In the perception of policy-makers, successful ageing is equated with good health and independence. To this end, the initial assignment of the Dutch government for the researchers in the Leiden 85-plus Study was to investigate the possibilities for investing in successful ageing according to *this* definition.

The study showed, however, that older people themselves had different perceptions about the concept of successful ageing. As mentioned earlier, older people do not wish to consider themselves “unsuccessful” if their health is decreasing. Optimal physical and cognitive functioning were perceived as an ideal situation but conflicted with the common knowledge that afflictions may occur at the age of eighty five. Those who enjoyed good health said they had been “lucky” and did not regard their good health as a personal “success.” Older persons who were limited in functioning stated that acceptance and adaptation are essential in maintaining a feeling of well-being. The absence of limitations does not constitute one’s success at old age; rather, success is measured by the way an older person can integrate his losses in his attitude to old age.

According to the psychologist Apostel old age is experienced as meaningful and worthwhile if older people are able to strive for goals, if they belong to social networks that enable them to communicate, to give and receive appreciation from others, if they are able to cope in a realistic way and can accept the irrevocable events.¹² According to the Dutch respondents, they succeed in life if they meet these conditions; the ability to maintain valued social contacts is their proof of “successfulness” in particular. In contrast to physical and cognitive functioning, social functioning is something that is achieved by their own merit.

Older people and policy-makers, therefore, perceived successful ageing differently in this study. Policymakers were interested in cutting down expenses in care provision, while older people wanted to preserve their social contacts and a feeling of self-esteem despite limitations and health problems. Ironically, listening to the answers of the older people about *their* notions of successful ageing, would not have resulted in a reduction in the costs of spending on the older population, but rather in a sharp increase.

¹² L. Apostel, ‘Zinvol ouder worden’, in: *Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 49 (1993) no. 23, 1713.

Social variations – Performances

Our list of opposing meanings has not yet ended. A term like “successfulness” can also play a strategic role; it can be a way of speaking that people use to position themselves in contrast to others; a social strategy to maintain a feeling of dignity. The quotes from elders in Ghana cited previously, are a case in point. The songs of praise for the wise, gentle, patient and respected older person were mainly songs the elders sang about themselves. Their claims about the advice they were giving to the younger generation, have to be understood as performances of respectability and successfulness. Visits to older people, direct observations and conversations revealed a different reality. In daily life, the older persons were not visited very frequently. Although the older people emphasised their central role within the family, their capability to give advice, and their role as teachers of knowledge, the youth was not very interested in their wisdom. It was only when the researcher started to ask deeper questions that older people admitted that practice was quite different from the ideal image of success in old age. One man remarked:

I do not understand why my grandchildren and younger people do not come to my house to listen to me and ask me about my knowledge. I would like them to come to me but they don't come. If they won't come, I will die and take my knowledge with me. My head is full of knowledge but they do not come to listen.

Van der Geest argues that the extremely positive image of old age is more an ideal cherished by the older people than an idea put into practice by the community.¹³ Outward respect is generally allotted to the older people, because they are old, but, at the same time, many do not enjoy the pleasure and satisfaction, which the title *panyin* promises. For many, being old and dependent is a condition fraught with feelings of disillusion. Being old in itself does not guarantee constant affection and support by the younger generations. Only those who have been successful in accumulating enough material and social capital may count on the realization of the ideal of *panyin*. Most of the others face the ambiguity of old age: outward respect and private neglect. Harsh economic circumstances and large-scale emigration affect the situation of older people.¹⁴ Children may find it almost impossible to provide their parents with support of any substance. How to harmonize the idea of respect with the reality of poverty constitutes a

¹³ S. van der Geest, 'The toilet: Dignity, privacy and care of elderly people in Kwahu, Ghana', in: S. Makoni & K. Stroeken (Eds.), *Ageing in Africa: Sociolinguistic and Anthropological approaches*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, 234.

¹⁴ N.A. Apt, *Coping with old age in a changing Africa: Social change and the elderly Ghanaian*, Aldershot: Avebury, 1996.

dilemma. Pretence may be the best solution: a public language of respect which not only draws the attention away from embarrassing situations, but also provides some comfort; the painfulness of neglect is reduced by the fact that it is not exposed. Both young and old collaborate in this act of pretence.¹⁵

The ideal of the *panyin*, as expressed in proverbs and daily conversation, may be a coping strategy and a form of “impression management.” It is a way of dealing with the loss of a high social status that is expressed in proverbs and popular beliefs. These proverbs are built upon a mythological past that is relived in conversations, and that must compensate for the present social and material poverty in the present.

Statements about a beautiful and successful life may also constitute a facade for older people to hide behind their frustration and pain, and to present themselves as successful in the eyes of others. This holds true for both older people in Ghana as well as in the Netherlands. This interpretation of successful ageing as “impression management” sheds a new light on the so-called ageing paradox,¹⁶ analogue to the disability paradox.¹⁷ This paradox focuses on the apparent contradiction between the objective state of poor health and loneliness and the subjective claim of feeling successful. It is indeed difficult for “outsiders” to understand how and why older people (say they) feel satisfied with their lives and experience optimal feelings of well-being.

Anthropological research does not present mere “facts” but findings of how people *present* themselves. Depending on the cultural context, the situation and the relationship between researcher and respondent, people may present themselves in different ways. Ethnography is bound to be “performative ethnography”.¹⁸ In their performance to the researcher, people try to build up an image of themselves. It is the task of the researcher to interpret this performance.

Spiritual variations

Successful ageing is increasingly connected with gerotranscendence, but here again we see strong variations. Transcendent changes of perspective, proposed to accompany the ageing process, bring the older person a sense of satisfaction in relation to the successful completion of his or her life. These changes occur

¹⁵ Van der Geest, ‘The toilet’, 234.

¹⁶ G.J. Westerhof et al., ‘The aging paradox: Towards personal meaning in gerontological theory’, in: S. Biggs et al. (Eds.), *The need for theory: Social gerontology for the 21st century*, Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2003, 127-143.

¹⁷ G.L. Albrecht & P.J. Devlieger, ‘The disability paradox: High quality of life against all odds’, in: *Social Science & Medicine* 48 (1999) no. 8, 977-988.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Fabian, *Power and performance: Ethnographic explorations through proverbial wisdom and theatre in Shaba, Zaire*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

on three levels; the self, the social and the cosmic.¹⁹ The “self level” depicts changes related to the self, in which a more contemplative/ philosophical attitude prevails, towards the development of wisdom. Changes on a “social level” reflect changes in the meaning and significance of social relationships, as well as the growing need for solitude. Finally, on the “cosmic” level, the older individual develops a higher sense of being connected with nature and creation, experiences a wider scope of time, space, life and death, and a growing affinity towards past and future generations. Old age is thus seen as a period in which existential concerns related to ultimate questions of life and death become of growing importance to older persons.

Ghanaian elders, as we have seen, claimed to have become gentler and more reflexive, thus emphasising their successful life. Similar observations were made in a small group of Dutch elderly. The third author conducted life-histories and focused conversations with older people aged between 68 and 89 years, living in the city of Amsterdam. He ensured a degree of variability within the group, by recruiting older people from a diverse range of socio-economic and religious / secular backgrounds, and with differing levels of health and mobility.²⁰

Growing older was voiced by some, to be associated with a deeper questioning of the meaning of life and the world. For instance, one married couple in the group, Leida and Jaap (pseudonyms), expressed their growing concern for wider social and political issues as they had grown older:

I look at the world differently now. When I was younger with children I had less interest in politics in the world, and less time for it too. But when you are older you look differently at people and the world. You start to question things more (*Leida, aged 75*).

I think now about how can it be possible that some people are really bad and are responsible for major crimes. I always think now, what is the reason for this and that? (*Jaap, aged 83*).

One woman described how helping her father, husband and a close friend when ill before their deaths, had all been experiences which had “come her way.” For her, helping others was something she did automatically. This also led her, she said, to looking after a woman with dementia, who lived above her flat, when her husband needed a break. Her ability to still help other older people was one practical way of coping with the sense of loneliness, heightened recently by the death of her close friend, who had been her constant companion during the last few years.

¹⁹ L. Tornstam, ‘Gero-transcendence: A meta-theoretical reformulation of the disengagement theory’, in: *Aging: Clinical and Experimental Research* 1 (1989), 55-63.

²⁰ E. Sadler, ‘Nuances of gerotranscendence: Exploring the views and experiences of older people in Amsterdam’ (Master thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2004).

According to Tornstam, the development towards wisdom in later life represents “understanding the difficulty in separating right from wrong” and “withholding from judgement or giving advice.”²¹ Around a third of the participants stated that they had become more reserved in giving advice as they had grown older. One common attitude was an awareness of the importance of listening to others, as well as being open to the differing opinions of others. One man expressed this as follows:

When I was younger I was stricter in my opinions. I was less likely to be influenced by other people with other opinions. Now I'm not so certain of my own convictions and creeds. I'm more willing to listen to other people, and take their opinions and compare them to mine, and perhaps come to the conclusion that they are right and I am wrong (...) You get mellow as you get older, and therefore you are not so strict concerning your own convictions.

Two other men felt a closer connection with the beauty of nature in old age. For one of these men, this provided him with a sense of “eternity.” Not believing in God or a divine power, he felt that nature “had thrust itself upon him”:

Since I have entered retirement I have become more aware of the environment. Previously when I used to go to Switzerland I would notice nature. I would notice nice flowers, plants and rocks etc. But I wouldn't feel part of it. These days it's obvious to me that nature has become very much a part of our lives. Living in a valley brings nature very close to you. The valleys are surrounded by large mountains so people are very much dependent on the nature around them (...) It makes you feel part of, well eternity sounds silly, but you feel very much welded to the environment that you're in.

These few quotations serve to illustrate a wide variety of experiences and claims about what makes old age meaningful and satisfying. For some, growing old meant becoming more attentive to others; for others it rather led to a degree of material and social detachment, and the seeking of solitude through a sense of spiritual concentration. Each variety of “transcendence” produced another picture of successful ageing.

Conclusion

The concept of “successful ageing” is often used in theoretical and policy-oriented publications, but it is far from univocal. Its meanings shift when we investigate its notions in diverse cultural and political contexts, or when we

²¹ L. Tornstam, ‘Gerotranscendence and the functions of reminiscence’, in: *Journal of Aging Studies* 4 (1999) no. 3, 155-166: 12.

focus on ways in which older people present themselves in social communication. This polyvalence of “successful ageing” is often insufficiently understood, which may then lead to conclusions that are full of hidden contradictions. In-depth, contextualizing and multi-level research is needed to debunk the subtle shifts in meaning of that popular term. “Successful ageing” is as much a social as a spiritual achievement, a physical as an economic thing, a fact as a wish, as much a truth as a lie.

