How Psychology Can Facilitate Positive Ageing
Can we achieve this for everyone?

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Overview of Talk

- Introduction
- Psychology
- Conceptual Framework: Life-span Developmental Psychology (LSDP)
- Mechanisms for Enhancing Positive Ageing
- Along the way, Some Local Evidence - ALSA
- Conclusions & Recommendations: Can we achieve positive ageing for everyone?
Introduction

- Broad brush overview
- Role of our own perceptions, thoughts, attitudes in shaping ageing as a positive experience
- **Ageing as a process**, not a state, but state of mind is fundamental
  - implies that it is possible to intervene in it, i.e., our own ageing experience can be changed!
- Can we achieve positive ageing for everyone?
  - in principle, yes, but…

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*I don’t think I ever *feel* old…*  
*I’ve been old for such a long time that it’s hard to know how to define that feeling.*  

Dame Roma Mitchell at 85 (1999)
Australian Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ALSA)

Multidisciplinary Scope: - bio-psycho-social

Sample:
* Population-based (Baseline = 2087; 565 couples)
* Heterogeneous:
  Community dwelling & residential care
  Households Stratified by Age & Gender:
    4 x 5-year cohorts from 70 & 1 x 85+

Duration: Baseline 1992 + 10 follow-ups: 11 Waves

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Psychology

- Study of Human Behaviour
  - Individuals, Dyads, Groups, Systems
  - Cognition
  - Affect (Emotion)
  - Self (Personality)

- “Positive Psychology” (Seligman, 1988, via Maslow, 1954)
  - scientifically studying what has gone right, rather than wrong in both individuals and societies
  - nurturing strengths to improve normal life
  - life satisfaction, happiness, resilience
Propositions from Life Span Developmental Theory

Development entails:
- A dynamic between biology and culture
- Multidimensional and multidirectional
  - growth vs maintenance vs regulation of loss
- Allocation of resources to distinct functions
  - gain/loss dynamic, losses > gains with ageing
- Ontogenetic (autobiographical) and historical contextual is guiding paradigm

Facilitators of Positive Ageing from LS View

- Resources
  - Self,
  - Social,
  - Cognitive
- Dynamic: gains/losses
- Multi-dimensional - directional
Normative age-related changes in how we perceive our SELF

- **Depression**
  - % Loss: 75%
  - % Gain: 15%
  - % Stable: 10%

- **Morale**
  - % Loss: 70%
  - % Gain: 18%
  - % Stable: 12%

- **Self-Esteem**
  - % Loss: 78%
  - % Gain: 11%
  - % Stable: 11%

- **Control**
  - % Loss: 76%
  - % Gain: 14%
  - % Stable: 10%


- **Current Cognition (MMSE)**
  - % Loss: 78%
  - % Gain: 11%
  - % Stable: 18%

- **Speed**
  - % Loss: 78%
  - % Gain: 18%
  - % Stable: 9%

- **Naming**
  - % Loss: 86%
  - % Gain: 12%
  - % Stable: 2%

- **Memory: Symbol**
  - % Loss: 86%
  - % Gain: 8%
  - % Stable: 6%

- **Memory: Picture**
  - % Loss: 73%
  - % Gain: 19%
  - % Stable: 8%
MECHANISMS FOR ENHANCING POSITIVE AGEING

In no particular order

Self Resources

- recent elaboration of notion of reserves or buffers or moderators of various outcomes
- In realm of psychological well-being self-esteem & perceived control

Contribute to
- Personal growth or modification of self-image
- Maintenance of capacities for resilience
- Regulation of loss or coping
- Overall positive affect
Perceived Control & Survival


More Evidence from ALSA about Benefits of Control

Linked to
- adapting well to driving cessation,
  - Often accompanied by depressive symptoms,
  - impact of these is less if sense of perceived control is maintained
- having larger social networks, especially with friends
- contributes to sense of integrity or wholeness, experiencing few regrets
Control the darker ages

Hagar

What did Dr. Zook say?

He said I have to stop drinking, overeating and staying out late.

He said a man my age has to make changes, and he's right...

Tomorrow I'm going to change doctors.

Self-Concept & Self-Compassion

- The organized, coherent, integrated pattern of self-perceptions, includes self-esteem

- Self-compassion: compassion turned inward
  - Self-kindness - treat self with care, not criticism
  - Common humanity - recognising loss as shared aspect of human experience, not isolating
  - Mindfulness - paying attention in a particular way: On purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally
**Possible Selves (Markus)**

- Created by projecting yourself into the future

- thinking about hopes and fears
  - *what you would like to become?*
  - *What you are afraid of becoming?*

- ALSA → generativity
  - caring for others
    - nurturing, mentoring, guiding
  - leaving a lasting legacy

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**Possible Selves as part of LS Context**

- Continuity with earlier self
- Aspirations or present self
- Goals for future self
- Openness to experience
Links Between Well-being and Perceptions of Self & Falls

- “Have you had any falls in the past year - including those falls that did not result in injury as well as those that did?”
  - Net of age, gender, education, health, smoking, alcohol use, psychotropic medication
- Worse Morale, Depression and Sense of Control each independently predicted incidence of falls, both between participants, and over time within participants

Cognitive Resources also Link to Positive Ageing

Marked cognitive decline over first two years predicts higher rate of mortality in subsequent 7 years
Use it or Lose it?

- Predicts that engagement in intellectual physical, and/or social activities offers protective benefits for cognitive decline
- By ‘exercising’ our mind, we forestall, slow down or prevent erosion of cognitive skills
- Contentious but compelling
  - Evidence is mixed and inconclusive
  - Mostly correlational or cross-sectional
  - Mechanisms unclear

Interpersonal and Social Resources

- Social Membership
- Social Networks
  - Family
  - friends
  - Confidants
  - Total
- Being Married
Social Membership (Clubs, Church, Groups)

Cumulative Survival

Days survived at 30.1.01


Social Networks

Friends

Confidants

Nelson-Aalen cumulative hazard

+ lower tertile  + middle tertile  + upper tertile
Conclusion

- Can we achieve positive ageing for everyone?
  - Knowledge of sense of self, especially perceived control is powerful
  - Self-compassion offers a way to deal with/accept losses
  - Remaining cognitively and social engaged also promotes ageing well
- Much of how positive we experience ageing to be depends on psychological resources and our context

Ageing Positively -
No one way to do it!
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