

How elderly people maintain a sense of purpose and personal identity when moving to a retirement community

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative investigation was carried out to explore the psychological well-being of a group of older adults recruited from an independent living retirement community (ILRC). This investigation studied the challenges these older adults faced to their self-concept and sense of purpose, and addressed gaps in existing research exploring autonomy, competence, and relatedness within ILRC's. Eight residents (aged 67-98) were interviewed about their lived experience of retirement and the transition to old age. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) revealed participants withheld a subjective perception of themselves as ageing, with many still feeling young and living full and active lives in the community, demonstrating the 'new age' of retirement. Remaining independent was inherently important to participants and being exposed to the oldest-old adults in the community further strengthened this need as it was a reminder of the reduction in autonomy that often accompanies old age. These results extend our understanding of successful ageing by showing that although retirement can be challenging, it can also be a time for people to flourish, and that retaining purposeful lives with a heightened sense of autonomy and meaningful relations with others can significantly improve well-being in later life.

KEY WORDS:	RETIREMENT COMMUNITY	PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING	PURPOSE	SUCCESSFUL AGEING
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Introduction

Due to a current ageing population and an increased life expectancy in the developed world, the psychological well-being in the later stages of adulthood has become a global public health concern (World Health Organization, 2011). With the number of people aged over 65 in the UK forecast to increase by 20% by 2024 (Office of National Statistics, 2016), and double by the year 2050 (Milne, 2013), never in the history of humanity have so many people grown so old at the same time. The retirement housing market has proliferated, and retirement communities are on the rise (Ota, 2015). There is often a focus on the financial aspects of retirement planning or the physical decline of retired individuals, less emphasis is placed on the psychological impact this vital life transition has upon people (Sharpley & Layton, 1998). As retirement is such a major life transition, it is of psychological interest to explore how those living in retirement communities have adapted to retirement life, and whether they have experienced an alteration in their sense of purpose and personal identity since no longer working.

It is often difficult to directly study the effects of retirement on well-being, as people retire at different ages and for different reasons, and some people only partially retire. There is a popular notion that retirement is something to be looked forward to (Davies & Cartwright, 2011). However, paradoxically, research has found that up to a quarter of people find the retirement transition to be highly difficult and experience a significant reduction in psychological well-being (Bosse, Spiro, & Kressin, 1996; Wang, 2007). In a large-scale interview study, retired individuals stated that they missed social connections the most, along with a feeling of diminished purpose, and a decrease in mental stimulation, which accounted for over 65% of the problem's they experienced (Pew Research Center, 2009).

Work affords most people the basis for their identity (Milne, 2013), and one of the first questions people often ask upon first meeting each other is 'What do you do?'. There is a large body of research into the effects of retirement on identity (e.g. Wang & Shi, 2014; Lally, 2007; Carter & Cook, 1995). A study on retired athletes found individuals to feel lost once their career had ended as they had dedicated so much of who they identified as, to their profession (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). However,

many people go through a succession of jobs in their lifetime and therefore may not feel their identity has been lost once retiring, as they are not losing one specific life-long role. People may begin to define themselves more by their leisure time when they retire (Dionigi, 2002). Research has found that the grandparent role is less significant in modern-day Western society due to older adults living more independent and social lives outside of the family network (Muller & Litwin, 2011). Individuals who are part of multiple social groups when they retire may therefore adjust better to the transition as their identity is drawn from various areas outside of their work, allowing greater self-continuity, and less role change (Haslam, et al., 2019).

Due to the longevity and heterogeneity of old age in developed countries, retirement has been re-conceptualised as involving two separate phases, rather than as one final life stage (Bauger & Bongaardt, 2016). It is argued that there is a 'third' and 'fourth' phase in which the third starts at retiring from work and involves many of the positive aspects of growing old (e.g. good physical health, social engagement, increased leisure activity); in contrast, the fourth is defined as the final period of functional decline that eventually leads to death (Lasslet, 1994). Research has found that individuals in the third age are becoming ageist toward individuals in the fourth age; which is rarely discussed in the literature (Kydd & Fleming, 2017). A study conducted in a retirement community found the incoming post-war 'Baby Boomers' (born between 1946-1964) to portray ageist attitudes toward people in the fourth age, due to observing the oldest-old adults as sick and deteriorating, causing the Boomers to begin to fear entering this eventual life stage (Roth et al., 2012). Older adults who perceive that others see them of a lower social status and feel pity and contempt toward them have reported experiencing a higher level of age discrimination (Vauclair et al, 2016). Cooley's '*looking glass self*' (1902) suggests that an individual's identity develops through their anticipation of other people's perception of the self and interpersonal interactions within society. Therefore, if older adults *feel* that society perceives them in a negative light, they may begin to develop unhealthy affirmations toward their self-concept (Sherman, 1994; Clark, 2008; Levy, 2009). Attitudes toward ageing have been found to be profoundly important in determining successful ageing (e.g. Laidlaw et al., 2007; Chonody, Webb, Ranzijn, &

Bryan, 2014); it is therefore vital that negative attitudes toward old age are transformed.

Once individuals have transitioned to the third age, they are faced with having to adapt to the loss of purpose provided to them by work, which is cited as one of the most vital aspects to human beings for living a fulfilling life (Hedberg, Gustafson, Alex, & Brulin, 2010). The seminal work of Langer and Rodin (1976, 1977) found that when nursing home patients were given personal choice, and the responsibility of looking after a plant, there was a significant increase in happiness, physical activity, and vitality. Research has even found the effects of usefulness to others in retirement to act as a predictor of mortality (Hill & Turiano, 2014). In a research sample of 70-79-year-olds, those who rarely felt useful to others compared with those who frequently felt useful to others, were more likely to increase in disability or die over a 7-year period (Gruenwald et al., 2007). Implications of this research for healthy ageing are that older adults who feel a sense of purpose through having personal agency, choice, and meaningfully contributing to the lives of others, may have longer time horizons.

It has been suggested that the ability to have complete control and choice over how to spend one's own time, which is often gained in retirement, is one of the most significant benefits for retiree's (Bauger & Bongaardt, 2016; Weiss, 2005; Ekerdt & Koss, 2016). However, the physical deterioration accompanied with old age may cause people to experience a change in the three components of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, involved in self-determination theory; a model explaining human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When individuals transition to the fourth age and have no choice but to limit their activity, they may find they have a reduction in autonomy and competence, due to needing to increase dependence on carers (Baltes & Smith, 2003).

Kasser & Ryan (1999) found that elderly people in nursing homes who perceived their environment as controlling were at greater risk for low physical well-being, and that a greater depth of emotional contact with outside social supports enhanced well-being. Importance of relatedness in later life has been explained by a motivational shift in which older adults put greater emphasis on emotion-related goals over

knowledge acquisition ones (Carstensen, 1999). A questionnaire study on 314 older adults recruited from 29 retirement communities in the United States, found that those who reported feelings of loneliness had a strong association with anxiety and depression (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Thus, being well-related with others in the later years may help prevent the development of mental health disorders. Retirees who decide to move to a retirement destination may therefore benefit most from forming a network of relationships within their new community (Osborn, 2012; Crisp, Windsor, Butterworth, & Anstey, 2015).

People may be reluctant to move to retirement accommodation as it may remind them of the fact that they are ageing and of their eventual mortality (Davey, 2006). Older adults are often forced to move due to no longer being able to maintain a large house on their own, when a spouse dies for example, or due to feeling lonely and wanting to integrate themselves within a new community (Bekhet, Zauszniewski, & Nakhla, 2009). Research has found that when considering old age accommodation, people disliked the term 'nursing home', and much preferred 'retirement community' as it was perceived as having less of a negative connotation attached to it (Castel, 2019, pg.4). Retirement communities' range in terms of offering independent or assisted living and enable older adults to live in an environment where they have security over the occurrence of an accident, without the stigmatization of being in a care home. There is psychological curiosity as to whether an individual's sense of freedom is compromised in any way when moving to this type of age-segregated environment.

Incentive for the proposed research is that a growing number of people will be in this position in the nearing future. Previous research into psychological well-being in old age has predominately focused on research studies in nursing and care homes, where there is little room for autonomy (e.g. Langer & Rodin, 1976; Kasser & Ryan, 1999; Cummings, 2002; Gaugler, Anderson, Zarit, & Pearlin, 2004), or on individuals living in non-retirement accommodation (e.g. Gruenwald et al., 2007; Neubauer, Schilling, & Wahl, 2015; Bauger & Bongaardt, 2016; Hansson et al., 2018); there is little qualitative research investigating the direct effects that living independently within a retirement community has upon people. This research has therefore set out to explore the lived experiences of retirement in a group of individuals recruited from

an independent living retirement community in North Ayrshire, Scotland. As the number of retirement communities increase, there is a greater need to explore how living within this particular environment contributes to psychological well-being in later life, and to investigate what factors may influence an older adult's self-concept and sense of purpose. There is interest to discover how older adults continue living well at a time where their biological capabilities are diminishing and to investigate whether growing old challenges their sense of who they are.

Method

Participants-

One man and seven women (aged 67-98) participated in the research. The sample was purposive and homogenous fitting with the requirements of IPA research, as participants were all above the age of 65, and were recruited from one independent living retirement community on the West Coast of Scotland. All participants responded to a poster advertisement placed in the communal area of the retirement community. The researcher lived in the community for a week as a visitor and attended community activities in between conducting interviews.

Development of the interview schedule-

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted individually with each participant. Interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes in length and took place in the retirement community. Interviews were recorded electronically on the researcher's mobile phone and transcribed verbatim. A biographic narrative method based on the '*3 sub-session interview*' developed by Wengraf (2001) was used to create the interview structure. This method aimed at encouraging participants to talk freely on their direct experience of the subject matter to gain a detailed narrative-based account. The first sub-session opened the interview with a broad, open-ended question asking participants to expand on '*every aspect of their experience of the transition from leaving work and entering retirement*' and were encouraged to talk freely about their career and how they found the transition from leaving it. This resulted in the participant detailing a narrative account almost entirely uninfluenced by the researcher.

The second sub-session was constructed as a series of follow-up questions in relation to the participants' answer of the first question. For example, when one of the participants had discussed the succession of jobs they had throughout their career, the question '*What was it about having multiple jobs that appealed to you?*' was asked. This sub-session therefore differed slightly for each participant depending on what they had talked about in sub-session one and encouraged them to elaborate on their narrative account.

The third and final sub-session involved 25 theoretical based questions, on the concept of identity, purpose, and psychological well-being in regard to living within the retirement community. For example, questions based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) included '*How important is it to you to feel self-sufficient and have other people see you this way?*' and '*How important is it to you to have choice over your own well-being and lifestyle?*'. This is a key component of IPA research, as it incorporates contemporary theoretical perspectives with phenomenological experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Analytical framework-

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999) was the method used to analyse the data in the current study. This idiographic method of data analysis was chosen as it involves an in-depth exploration of each participants experience, allowing the researcher to engage in an interpretative relationship with each interview transcript (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA requires the researcher to interpret the personal experiences of each participant while at the same time not drifting too far away from the participants phenomenological account. The experience of life transitions is very individualistic and subjective, and its effects would be difficult to interpret and express in detail through a nomothetic quantitative approach (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994).

During IPA, the researcher first began by gaining a familiarization with each transcript by reading each script multiple times in order to gain an understanding of the participants experience. Each transcript was then analysed individually, line by line, with anything of psychological interest or significance recorded on the left hand-margin; formulating codes. Eventually, the codes were transformed in to emerging

themes on the right-hand margin. Due to the phenomenological nature of the method used, the themes that were formulated were grounded directly in the participants experience of what they had said in the interview. In accordance with Smith et al. (1999) guidelines, all eight verbatim transcripts were analysed in the same way, and subsequently compared against each other to eliminate any sparse or insignificant themes and develop a list of master themes that were prevalent throughout. Themes that were found across accounts were clustered together and refined to formulate three overarching superordinate themes with sub-themes, that were all directly relevant to the research area under investigation.

All participants have remained anonymous and have been referred to by their participant number (P1-8) in the current study.

Analysis/Results

Super-ordinate themes that emerged across participant accounts were: Subjective perception of ageing, the need for autonomy, and maintaining a purpose. Illustrative quotes have been used to demonstrate how the researcher interpreted each particular statement. A brief description capturing the essence of each theme is presented in table 1.0 below.

Table 1.0 – Themes, sub-themes, and description.

Themes	Subthemes	Description
<i>Subjective perception of ageing</i>	A) Perception of self as ageing	Each participants perception of their own age and not letting it define them
	B) Impact of others perception of self	The importance to each participant of how they believe others perceive them
	C) Perceived threat by residents in the fourth age	How participants viewed those in the community that were less autonomous and more dependent. A fear that these residents will cause a misconception to the community of being a care home
<i>The need for autonomy</i>	A) Importance of having control over own life	The importance to each participant of being independent and having choice and control over their own lifestyles
	B) Frustration over ageing barrier to do enjoyed activities	Participants frustration over independence being compromised in terms of having to limit physical activity and no longer do enjoyed hobbies
<i>Maintaining a purpose</i>	A) The need to always have something to do	Participants stressing the importance of constantly having things to keep them busy every day and to not have 'nothing'
	B) Being part of the community	How being part of the retirement community gives the participants meaningful relationships with others and prevents them from ever feeling lonely

Subjective perception of ageing

In contrast to chronological age which is based on the objective calendar age in which an individual was born, subjective age refers to age as experienced by the individual.

Perception of self as ageing

All participants expressed how being retired was not inherently linked to their identity. P8 stated *“I never thought of myself as retired”* (106), and P5, *“I didn’t feel like that’s it I’m old now”* (8). P5 went on further to explain how being retired wasn’t about forming a new identity, but the beginning to a new chapter of life:

“I don’t actually think of myself as retired, you know it’s not something that enters my psyche, it’s just me, and this is the next stage of my life kind of thing.” (160).

When retiring, all eight participants were still in the third age of life and were in good physical health which may be the reason they didn’t feel any major changes to their self-concept. Because they were still active members of the community, they explained feeling no different relative to their younger selves.

P2 who was originally reluctant to enter retirement stated, *“Oh god I would have worked until I was 100, absolutely. I loved working. It wasn’t so much that I loved the job, I liked going to work because it kept me young.”* (57), which implies that she had formed an association of working with youthfulness and positivity. P3 who had been a writer all her life stated, *“I never actually saw myself as being retired as I always had the next novel in mind that I was going to write.”* (111). She explained that through having an ongoing project with a future-focus, she was able to maintain continuity in regard to her career identity.

Participants gave off a clear impression that being ‘old’ was something to be dreaded, and that through feeling young they could avoid it. P5 explained *“That’s a sign when you’re getting old, you know when you are kind of ready to withdraw from what’s going on outside and I’m not ready for that yet”* (180). This quote represents how being old can be viewed as a state of mind to participants, and the belief that as soon as they accept that that is what they are, and start changing their behaviour because of it, that is the end to them. P2 explained how she never actually anticipated her future self as ever being old, *“I said I’ll never get to be 60, I’ll never be that old”* (158). The acceptance of becoming old may have been too difficult for

participants as old age often has a negative stigma attached to it, and it is a reminder to the narrowing of time, and their eventual mortality.

Physiological changes associated with ageing appeared to be more defining in some participant's self-concept, than by their being retired. P8 stated:

"I've had to deal with the physical changes with getting older now and I would say that has changed me more than anything, not being able to drive to places anymore, and get about as easily as I used to." (96).

Although she wanted to remain feeling youthful and avoid a negative age-related self-concept, she'd had to accept physical changes within herself, even if she didn't feel any different psychologically. This represents the moving from the third age into the fourth age, and psychological discord in terms of participant's ideal and actual self.

Impact of others perception of the self

Extremely high regard was placed upon how participants believed others viewed them. For example, P1 (male) explained, *"the people here, they all know I'm old, but I don't think they treat me as if I'm old and decrepit"* (270). This participant, although 98 years old, explains his determination to not have other people view him as irrelevant, explaining that just because he is old does not mean he is of any less value. Additionally, P2 stated:

"I don't tell anyone that I'm 85, I always tell them I'm 35, simply because the minute I say I'm 85 I can see the faces change and their hands always go out to help me, so I don't tell anybody my age" (393)

This participant has a strong demand for other people to not stigmatize her and treat her as incompetent due to knowing her chronological age. It is inferred that because she feels internally young, she believes her age shouldn't need a label on it that will lead her to be treated as helpless by people. These accounts represent how the

experience of ageing is not simply an individual experience but is deeply socially embedded.

Participants explained their difficulty in accepting help from other people:

“I think most of the people now are rushing in to help me, if I stumble or if I have difficulty getting out a chair you know they rush forward, but I tend to say I’m alright mate give me a minute or two.” (P1, 383)

This participant further expands on the need for people to not view him as helpless. This was further emphasized by the need to prove competence to others; P2 confirmed this, *“I have a cousin who when I moved here, she thought I was in a home, I went to see her as I wanted to prove that I’m bloody not and am fit to drive and the rest of it.” (280)*. She expressed how vital it was for her to be able to prove her cousin wrong, which appeared to be extremely important for her own self-concept. This demonstrates the complex relationship between self-concept and the perceived view of the self by others, further emphasizing the socially-embedded nature of the self.

Participant’s expressed concern that people may view them as living in a care home or some form of assisted living. Many gave of a sense of resentment toward this, P5 explained *“I think they thought it was more like an old people’s home where there was maybe staff you could call on” (211)*. This illustrates a common misconception the retirement community receives. Participants express how they don’t want people to view them any less able since moving to this new accommodation that is centred on remaining ‘independent’.

The perceived threat of community stigmatization by residents in the fourth age

Participants expressed interesting views toward residents in the community who were more physically disabled than they were. Participants stated how these more dependent residents who relied on daily care were the ‘old people’ and that in comparison, they felt young. For example, P5 stated:

“When I look at my neighbours like some of them that were downstairs with us this afternoon and I think Oh god, see they’re old, and especially the crabby ones you know, I don’t want to be like that.” (163)

She then went further on to explain how seeing others in the community that were physically declining made her feel uneasy and further motivated her to withhold her independence:

“I was thinking that is someone who has become dependent on neighbours and carers. It’s so easy to do and that’s what I’m determined not to do.” (467)

This highlights the significance of having other people as a frame of reference for what not to become. There was a strong fear that the dependent residents would cause the community to become stigmatized as a care home, as they had previously expressed their concern when discussing other’s perception of them. P6 explained:

“This is an independent living place and we’re trying to keep that but there are so many now you’ll see, that have carers in four times a day I mean quite a few of them have got that as they get older naturally, and as the manager said it’s not an old folks home, you know it isn’t a home, it’s not supposed to be, but that’s what its turning in to.’ (211)

This quote explains how the institutional authority of the community has even reinforced the notion that it is not a care home, encouraging residents to not feel as if they are ‘old’. P5 further added:

“I think it has to be a place where people are looking after themselves which isn’t the case” (390)

There is evident anxiety that the homes in which participants live, and independently own, may become viewed as an institution due to the flux of carers accessing the building. Co-habiting an environment with the oldest-old adults may remind participants of the reduction in autonomy and competence that comes with ageing

and elicit trepidation. These quotes portray how the fourth agers presence in the community is a threat to participants state of mind in terms of their own ageing, demonstrating how vulnerable the state of mind is to being challenged.

The need for autonomy

Autonomy refers to the capacity of an individual to make choices in accordance with their own free will, without any external input.

Importance of having control over one's own life

The need to remain independent and to not lose the ability to make their own decisions was an extremely prevalent concern to all participants. For example, P1 stated:

"I think you've got to always be able to choose [...] If I became completely helpless, I wouldn't know what to do, I don't want to go into a home, I don't."
(293).

This statement demonstrates how this participant could not imagine a life where he completely lacked self-sufficiency. It conveys how feared institutions like care homes are, and his determination to never end up in one, distinguishing the ILRC from a 'home'.

P2 discussed an experience of when her independence was compromised:

"Friends would keep trying to push me in the wheelchair and I was so rude [...] because I knew, once I'd start accepting help and letting people push me around, then they would have to come in and cook for me, and help me wash myself, dress myself, and that's the beginning" (368).

This represents the resilience of not letting any physical disablements get in the way of her independence. She explains that if she were to let other's help, they would make a habit of it and she would inevitably become dependent on them. She implies

the loss of independence would be the beginning to an end, which signifies how fundamental this psychological need is to her.

Furthermore, P4 added:

“I don't have dementia and I do like to be in control of my own life.” P4, (212).

This participant explains how she is in no way willing to lose her cognitive ability, as she had already experienced a reduction in her physical independence. This fear of losing control of the mind is further exemplified by P7:

“While I'm compos mentis, yes. I have a solicitor for when I get dodgy who can take over business things. [...]. The problem is that if you can't talk very well and are less able to move then you've got to think what's next?” (179).

Psychologically she was anticipating the changes that her future self may have to face. She discussed this in a very logical, planned manner, which may be in order to aid the anxiety over this unimaginable loss of control to her life.

P5 goes even further to explain how she would rather not be alive than be alive with a complete lack of autonomy and competence:

“I like the idea that I can still do things, I'm dreading it when I can't and possibly having to rely on someone else to do things, I don't want to be here if that happens, I want a wee blue pill.” (301)

This participant explains how in her mind it is better to not exist than to exist in a suboptimal state that does not feel like her. Following on from previous quotes it may be that the fear of losing independence has been strengthened by living around residents in the community who already have and being exposed to the negative aspects that ageing can entail.

Frustration over the physical ageing barrier to do enjoyed activities

Despite participants insistent need to withhold their independence, they also came to acknowledge and accept some of the barriers they've encountered due to ageing. P3 stated *"I would love to be able to walk and not panic about not being able to get home in time to sit down."* (377). She expressed frustration as she's been able to walk sufficiently throughout her lifetime and is now faced with an unavoidable impediment that she cannot control.

Internal discontent was conveyed when participants discussed some of the things they can no longer do. P6 explained *"I'm a bit disappointed in myself that I'm not walking so much."* (239). These participants have been able to do these skills throughout their lifetime, and to suddenly lose the ability causes changes to their self-concept, making them doubt their abilities. On the other hand, the few participants who were less physically able (3 out of 8) illuminated an acceptance of these age-related changes:

"I miss my active interests but there's no way out, I've no alternative." (P7, 245).

These participants explained that there is no choice but to accept the changes related to their independence, and that life must go on. It may be something that people cannot come to terms with until it's actually happened to them, which may be why the more physically-able participants portrayed such apprehension to losing the ability to do things and needing to accept help.

Participant's explained techniques they've implemented into their lives in order to optimize their current abilities:

"Because of my sight problems that's limited me, but the reading I can do, I've got a kindle and you can enlarge the print on that." (P3, 156)

This participant explains how she's compensated for her sight loss by optimizing her ability through an electronic reading aid. Furthermore, P4 explained substitutions she's used:

“I listen more to the radio now more than anything because I don’t see very well, and television.” (165).

Rather than stopping activity altogether, participants have found ways to still enjoy the interest but through a different, more accessible means. They make it clear that they are not simply falling apart relative to their younger selves but are instead selecting activities to do based on their current resources and ability.

Maintaining a purpose

The need to always have something ‘to do’

Although retirement signifies the end to paid work, it does not mean many of the positive aspects of work cannot still be experienced. P2 explained:

“I think if you lose your sense of purpose you lose your sense of identity. I think a sense of purpose, of having somewhere to go, places to go, people to meet and jobs to be done, are all my sense of purpose and they keep me going.” (506)

For this participant, it is clear that she has come to a realisation of a psychological need to keep busy and remain feeling useful. She explained *“I suppose the social club is my new job.” (213)*. Through taking on roles within the community, she had maintained a structure to her life.

Leisure time was extremely important to participants. P1 stated, *“If you drop one hobby you’ve got to take up another, I can’t have nothing, nothing doesn’t exist.” (263)*. Regularly partaking in enjoyed hobbies may be a way for participants to improve their eudemonic well-being by maintaining the feeling of a meaningful existence through further developing interests without the draining demands of work.

For P7, her sense of purpose was described as involving simpler mental and physical stimulation, as she had become unable to leave her flat without assistance, *“To try and keep moving, to get to the bathroom, to walk back, to look at the telly*

programmes" (205). Although her daily goals are smaller, she still shares the prevalent theme of needing to stay occupied and explains finding joy through the smaller things in life.

Participants discussed wanting to spend their time doing something rewarding while in retirement. Participants 5 and 6 explained how they took up volunteering:

"I look at these charity shops and think I should be doing something useful."
(P5, 203)

"In the end I was really glad to retire because I joined the women's voluntary service, and I've been there for 45 years now, so that really took up a lot of my time." (P6, 10)

It may be that to these participants, retirement was a time for them to reflect on their lives and realise what they were grateful for. By doing this they acknowledged the need to do something meaningfully involved with helping people, like volunteering. This benevolence may be something that is strengthened with age.

Being part of the community

The retirement community itself contributed to participants sense of purpose, as demonstrated by P5, *"I think we all need a sense of purpose. I do friends shopping and things like that"* (353). For most participants, being well-related with others in the community prevented them from feeling lonely as they were no longer able to see family often, P3 explained *"It's lovely to have friends here and you know we meet together quite a lot, so you're lonely but not lonely all the time."* (P3, 145).

Participant's explained how part of the reason for moving to the community was to strengthen social connections:

"When I was on my own in the bungalow and my two neighbours moved away, I felt lost and so I went out even more just to meet people, but no I don't have to do that here." (P6, 307)

Similarly, P8 explained:

“When I was coming down here, I thought to myself, I wonder whether I’ll like living you know with a lot of other people, now I love it.” (275)

These statements elucidate the psychological need for participants to be socially related to other people. Participants explained how their social connections were weakened due to no longer working, spouses passing, and no longer living near family; therefore, there was a need to move to somewhere where they could develop new friendships with like-minded others, and the retirement community suited this need perfectly.

All of the participants interviewed were either active members of the community’s social group or have been in the past. One of the few men involved in the social group expressed a contrasting opinion:

“I feel obliged today to come have a few words with the ladies here, now where are the other men they should be doing that here as well, but they don’t.” (P1, 399) “I sometimes think to myself am I a bloody nuisance, I could be, if they want to talk about women’s things am I a hinderance?” (251)

He conveys confusion as to why other men wouldn’t join in with the weekly coffee afternoons; which were established to be the favourite activity by all participants, among film nights and exercise classes. His discern toward the lack of men joining in may have been due to him fearing that he may be imposing on the group of women, leading him to question his own presence and self-worth in terms of being a group member.

Discussion

This research explored experiences of well-being in an independent living retirement community and investigated changes older adult’s face to their self-concept and sense of purpose. Interviews revealed participants as living full and active lives with many still feeling young, demonstrating the new ‘third age’ of retirement, which was evident in participants up to their nineties. Uneasiness was portrayed toward

residents in the community who had transitioned to the fourth age, creating a fear that the community may become stigmatized, and further encouraged participants to withhold their independence. All participants made it clear that they were not ready to simply 'deteriorate' and were living purposeful lives through having hobbies and engaging in social relations with other residents in the community.

Subjective perception of ageing

A paradox of ageing was presented by participants in the third age who recognized they were growing old yet did not view themselves as being 'old'. Many of them weren't experiencing problems with everyday life which may be why they felt no major changes in their self-concept. Self-concept is defined as being 'the totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object' (Rosenberg, 1979), and has been suggested to be the framework for an individual's personality (Rogers, 1959). It was the few participants who depended on carers that expressed an acceptance of themselves as being old. This finding expands on the research of Heikkinnen (2000) who found that older adults only begin to perceive themselves as 'old' once they experience an increase in disability. It was evident that all of the residents had entered the community as active members of society, and then few had physically declined with age whilst they were there. The ILRC manager further reinforced to the residents that it was not a 'home', encouraging them to feel younger. There was a clear distinction presented between the ILRC and a care home, which contributed positively toward all participants self-concept in terms of living there.

Participants expressed negative attitudes toward the more dependent residents, implying that if they were to move on to a care home, they would be able to feel psychologically younger and fitter without the reminders of the ageing decline. However, it must be noted that participants moved to a 'retirement' community, and therefore must have been aware that they would be in an environment primarily with people in old age. It may not have occurred to participants at the time of moving that they may eventually be surrounded by people who were a lot more disabled than they were, as these individuals are often associated as being in a care home. A dichotomy was presented in terms of residents in the community who were active

and 'successful' in ageing and those who were perceived as inactive and 'unsuccessful'. In addition to being less capable, residents were perceived as unsuccessful if they demonstrated a refusal of exerting 'will', as this was a highly valued attribute by participants. The comparison of themselves to others who were less able may have been in order to construct a more positive identity, as research has found older adults to feel better about themselves when deeming themselves fitter and more physically able than others from the same age group (Kydd, Fleming, Gardner, & Hafford-Letchfield, 2018). Participant accounts indicated that the ageing experience is not just as an individually interpreted phenomenon, but a complex and deeply socially embedded process. Participants anticipation of how others viewed them had a significant impact on their self-concept, further enforcing the notion that an individual's self grows out of interpersonal interactions (Cooley, 1902).

The current findings show noteworthy similarity to previous research discovering ageism between the third and fourth age (Roth et al., 2012). This can be explained by the societal construction of ageing in Western society as negative and 'unproductive', which influences how older adults perceive themselves and others (Talarsky, 1998). Swift et al. (2017) suggest that older adults who are on the border of reaching the fourth age need to challenge negative age stereotypes in order to counter the effects of stereotype threat and embodiment. Participants demonstrated how they were not living up to the stereotypes by remaining active lifestyles; however, still portrayed ageist views toward residents in the fourth age, a state of life that they would experience if they continued to live. Gilleard & Higgs (2011) suggest that individuals in the third age distance themselves from the 'oldest-old' adults in order to avoid the negative social stereotypes that accompany that label. This would explain why participants so strongly wished to not be associated with the dependent residents in the community, to avoid having to view themselves in a way that they did not value.

Need for autonomy

Having the ability to exert control over one's own life has been cited by many as a fundamental human need (e.g. McAdams, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Leotti, Lyengar, & Ochsner, 2010), and research has continued to support the importance of having

personal control as we age (Mallers, Claver, & Lares, 2013). It is not realistic to expect 'complete' control over one's own life at any age; however, participants made it clear that they were exerting the maximum amount of control that they could given their current circumstances and physical condition, and that they were not willing to give up just because they were growing older.

Participants unrelenting need to remain autonomous and competent further expands on the research into self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Kasser & Ryan, 1999), explaining that across the life-span people need to make choices and exert control over their lives in order to achieve psychological health. Vallerand and O'Connor (1989) studied motivation in the elderly, finding the locus of desired control and perceived residential constraint to highly influence well-being. Feeling independent and self-sufficient in old age has also been related to personal growth and having a purpose in life (Ferrand, Martinent, & Durmaz, 2014) which was demonstrated in how participants were living optimal lifestyles through having these psychological needs met. It was very important for participants to know that they were not being lazy and 'giving up'. This was demonstrated through the negative judgments of others in the community who they believed weren't putting in the effort.

It was brought to light how participants compensated for the physical ageing barrier by finding more accessible means of doing activities they wanted to. This can be explained by the selective optimization and compensation model (SOC; Baltes & Baltes, 1990), which states that when individuals age and experience a reduction in physical ability, they actively select attention on to fewer, more accessible goals in order to optimize their ability to achieve the goal. Participants demonstrated this, showing how they compensated for the ageing decline through using reading aid's, walking sticks, and simply directing their attention to simpler pursuits. This enabled participants to further withhold their independence, strengthening this psychological need. Research has found older adults who use SOC to score higher on subjective well-being and lower on loneliness (Freund & Baltes, 1999); therefore, SOC should be encouraged more widely in retirement communities and nursing homes.

Maintaining a purpose

Participants demonstrated how they were achieving personal fulfilment through keeping busy and having hobbies which contributed to their sense of purpose. It was construed that having something meaningful 'to do' enhanced participants sense of having something 'to be'. This can be related to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs as participants were fulfilling their talents and potentialities, helping them to achieve self-actualisation. Research has found older adults who are more creative-actualizing cope better with approaching mortality and the awareness of the finiteness of time (Landau & Maoz, 1978). This was represented in how participants explained their continuation of creative passions such as writing and baking, and how they were not willing to resort to 'nothingness' just because they were growing older. The benevolence that was identified by participants who had dedicated their retirement to volunteering can be explained by the work of Victor Frankl (1992) who suggests that when people do something that transcends themselves, contributing meaningfully to the well-being of others, they experience purpose. These findings also further confirm research demonstrating the feeling of usefulness in later life to significantly improve physical and psychological well-being (Langer & Rodin, 1976; Hill & Turiano, 2014; Gruenwald et al., 2007).

Even the more dependent participants demonstrated how they were doing what they could at every level of decline and were not simply giving up. They expressed how they were exerting will and putting in effort in the face of the physical limitations they had encountered. Staying occupied and involved with others has been found to be necessary to have a satisfying life in later development (Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1963). Activity theory (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953) explains this notion, suggesting that an individual's life satisfaction is directly linked to their level of activity, and the inactivity of older people is often due to deeply rooted ageism within social norms. This theory has empirical evidence within the older population (Knapp, 1977), and relates to the current research as participants were strongly motivated for others to perceive them as living highly active lifestyles in their retirement.

Having meaningful relationships with people is commonly associated with feeling a sense of purpose (Feeney & Collins, 2014). Participants made it clear that they did not want to be cut-off from the world and that they strongly valued the small social group in the community who would regularly meet together. It was established that

being connected in an ongoing way with the social group around them significantly contributed to their sense of purpose. This further demonstrates that purpose is not only found through being a grandparent in later life, but through being part of a social group (Muller & Litwin, 2011). The weekly coffee afternoons were established to be the favorite community activity, involving a group of the residents socializing around a table. These findings confirm previous research into the importance of relatedness in SDT, as well as expanding on socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 1999). SST suggests that when individuals time horizons shorten, they invest greater motivation into meaningful activities over extrinsically motivated ones. Participants explained how the regular social interaction with the small group in the community was extremely important for their well-being, and that part of their reason for moving was to increase social connections, expanding on previous literature (Osborn, 2012; Crisp, Windsor, Butterworth, & Anstey, 2015).

Limitations and Conclusion

When collecting data, the researcher stayed as a visitor in the retirement community for a week, allowing an immersion into the micro-culture within the community. Having the ability to do this allowed the researcher to grasp an understanding of dynamics within the community and observe social interactions between the residents. It must be noted that throughout the completion of this research, the researcher consciously made sure to remain objective and to not allow any personal thoughts or beliefs sway interpretation of the data.

A methodological critique of this research is that the sample size was small and specific as participants were all white middle-class, and only one male was interviewed. All participants were financially able to spend their retirement in nice retirement accommodation, which is not the case for many older adults, and the degree to which the results extend to both genders is uncertain. However, a benefit of the current study was the representation of the socially embedded nature of the ageing experience and the expansion on literature into fundamental needs and the transition from the third to the fourth age in a way that was not apparent from previous survey research.

In future research it may be more appropriate to interview individuals in independent living retirement communities (ILRC's) by a cohort of their ability, as age is often not predictive of dependence, and many people in ILRC's differ widely in terms of how physically able they are. This way, a more detailed and comparable understanding of the effect's ageing has on an individual psychologically, can be acquired. Directions for future research should also focus on ethnographic studies as older people are valued very differently in non-Western cultures (Vauclair et al., 2016), therefore the measurement of attitudes toward ageing and older people's self-concept, may show conflicting results.

Overall, this study highlighted the importance for older adults to maintain a positive age-related self-concept by having social connections with others, a sense of purpose, and a feeling of heightened autonomy. It demonstrated how ageing is subjectively experienced by the individual, and that individuals in the third age who are exposed to the negative aspects of ageing, begin to elicit trepidation to entering the fourth age. Implications of this research for successful ageing are that individuals in the third age should be encouraged to change their negative attitude toward the oldest-old, in order to prevent psychological ill-being. This research has provided new evidence for existing psychological theory about the third/fourth age distinction, as well as research illuminating the fundamental importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, across the life-span. Additionally, this study has added to the rather sparse research into psychological well-being within independent living retirement communities.

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