

Ageing, Mental Health, and the Development of Wisdom

'It is through this stage that the life cycle weaves back on itself in its entirety, ultimately integrating maturing forms of hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love and care, into a comprehensive sense of wisdom.' (Erickson, 1986)

Does Age Inevitably mean Decline?

Early studies of ageing have tended to promote negative views of abilities in later adulthood. A bias to look only for negative change neglects the positive aspects of ageing such as gains in life experience and knowledge. More recent research, however, has focused increasingly upon the possibility of making positive adjustments throughout the life span. The ability to absorb a wide range of different points of view and values may be particular to the elderly. Qualities such as wisdom and integrity, in successful ageing, can be as much a part of everyday thought processes as logic and reasoning, and include intuition, emotion and personal experience.

Intelligence in the Everyday Environment

Laboratory research has typically failed to examine the use of intelligence and adjustment in real life. However, studies of other cultures help to give us a broader perspective on later development. Social stereotypes in everyday culture, such as the expectation that old age is inevitably accompanied by helplessness and decline, may be detrimental to the physical and emotional well-being of elderly people. However since individuality increases with age, it is not realistic to view the elderly as a uniform group. In therapy, for example, we need to view the person in the context of their entire life history. Development in later life may be seen as taking place on several fronts simultaneously, and whilst some skills may be in decline, we can select those pursuits that mean the most to us personally.

Growth and Meaning in Later Life

Eric Erickson was one of the first psychologists to take an explicit interest in old age, seeing development as occurring throughout the life span, with connections between earlier experiences and attitudes in later life in a 'meaningful interplay between beginning and end'. Earlier stages of life become more meaningful; even painful past events may be viewed positively and in greater perspective, providing a new source of strength. The later stages of life, he suggests, involve the task of evaluating one's life as it has been lived, and facing the inevitability of impending death. Ideally one finds personal satisfaction, and a better relationship and meaningfulness with the world and others. Wisdom is seen as an '...informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself'. The older generation are potentially of great value, and if

encouraged to act as guides, the young can benefit from their accumulated years of experience and learning.

The Potential Value to Society of Older People

David Gutmann, an anthropologist, argues against the catastrophic view of ageing, in which the later years are characterised by depletion and decline (1988). He also proposes that the elderly are of real value to society, provided that we recognise and utilise that fact. For example, the elderly play a vital role in supporting parenting, and '...are necessary for the well-being of all age groups, particularly the young'. However, like Erickson, Gutmann stresses that successful development throughout life depends on favourable social conditions. Therefore, while it is not uncommon for the elderly in modern western societies to encounter stigmatisation and increasing social disadvantage, ageing may be a different and more positive experience in a culture which offers new roles to older people, in turn promoting new capacities, and 'ensuring self, social and species continuity'. Older people have the opportunity to serve their society, at the same time as being served by it.

The Role of the Elderly in Traditional Societies

Gutmann looked at such remote cultures as the Navajo, Maya and Druze. Despite their diversity, these societies had certain important features in common in that the elders tend to be powerful, revered, and respected by their youngsters. The elders are powerful in community affairs, and co-habitation of extended families is the norm. Expertise and experience are passed from father to son on a daily basis. He discovered that between men and women a kind of role reversal takes place as new traits and skills are uncovered by each. He found evidence of a decline in male aggression, competitiveness and productivity with age. This was accompanied by a tendency towards more passive and collaborative activities such as maintaining peace and order, contemplation and counselling, and the passing on of life experience, and cultural and spiritual values to younger generations. The ageing process is seen more in terms of replacement than loss, these special roles and functions providing alternative sources of social status and self-esteem. Women on the other hand, become increasingly assertive and self-sufficient with age, expanding '...into the power vacuum left by the ageing husband', in an active re-structuring of the family network. Interestingly, Jung noted that in the second half of life a woman '...allows her unused supply of masculinity to become active', whilst for men it tends to be the other way around.

Ageing in Western Society

There is cause for pessimism regarding the fate of elderly people in modern Western society, since a well-rooted, traditional culture is seen as a pre-requisite for the achievement of potential in later life. Urbanisation has been accompanied by the breakdown of the extended family, and a shift in emphasis from shared to individual goals, both of which may leave elderly people feeling particularly vulnerable. Within

cities the protection of cultural and social bonds is typically lacking, and when people shift from their area of origin, they lack the opportunity to build credit during their active years in the eyes of familiar others, which could be recognised and rewarded in old age. With their roles in maintaining culture, and the extended family diminished, the elderly may lose their self-esteem and meaning, and perceive themselves increasingly as a burden to others. Perhaps we need to recognise the strengths of older people, and encourage them to recover their cultural roles, and remind us of our roots.

The Role of Reminiscence in Adjustment in Later Life

With a particular interest in peoples' personal experiences of ageing, Coleman from Southampton University carried out a 16 year long study focusing on the value of reminiscence for individuals. Reminiscence in later years may help to maintain self-identity, as well as promote on-going development. The 'life review', for example, may be a predominantly internal process and a means of gaining self-acceptance as past conflicts are resolved. The 'storytelling' function of reminiscence, on the other hand, has social significance since valuable life experiences, accumulated wisdom, and aspects of social history may be passed on to younger generations. This in turn may enhance the self-esteem of the storyteller both in having this valuable contribution to make, and through reflecting positively on past life and the part he or she played. It could be argued that a sense of continuity will be preserved, as the present and future can be perceived and evaluated in the context of the past. It is only with the passage of time that one can look back on events and experiences with full appreciation and understanding.

Decision-Making and Control: The Role of the Social Environment

Ellen Langer has conducted a number of experiments in the US that indicate the benefits of increased 'mindfulness' in terms of health, motivation, and even longevity, in the elderly. Her participants have been drawn largely from nursing homes. In one experiment, participants in the experimental group were encouraged to make meaningful decisions for themselves within the context of their daily lives. For example, residents were asked to choose where, from a selection of venues, they would prefer to receive visitors, whilst an equivalent group received no such choice. Also whilst all residents were given houseplants, only one group were explicitly encouraged to take responsibility for their own plants. Some significant findings emerged. Those given increased responsibility showed immediate gains in terms of increased happiness and alertness, more independence, as well as greater participation in social events. Remarkably, these gains were maintained 18 months later. Additionally the experimental group enjoyed better physical health and a lower mortality rate than their control group counterparts. This work highlights the extent to which our surroundings shape the possibilities open to us. Mindfulness promotes choice; on the other hand stereotypic assumptions give rise to the view that any signs of ageing are irreversible. Low expectations of an elderly person's capabilities, combined with a tendency to rush

in and 'help' them perform routine actions, increases dependency and helplessness, which in turn reinforces negative beliefs regarding ageing.

Adaptation and Wisdom

Researchers in the past have suggested that peak intellectual functioning is characterised by logical, objective thought. However, while there may be some age-related decline in this regard, many feel that other progressive changes in thought occur in later life. For example, the ability to tolerate paradoxes and live with complexity arguably increases with maturity, and this may be advanced more by intuitive thought and understanding of the current environmental context, than by reasoning alone. Perhaps openness and flexibility replace the more rigid thinking of earlier life. With the growth of wisdom we may be able to achieve harmonious conclusions regarding life's problems, and issues within relationships, and increasingly accept that change in all things is inevitable. Wisdom may also involve a tendency to respond only to that which has real value and meaning to us; and by being selective in our activities and engagements, we may actually increase our efficiency. Taken together, strategies such as focusing one's energies and skills; maximising life opportunities, and capitalising upon social resources, may offset other age-related factors which threaten performance in a given activity or vocation, thus promoting successful adjustment and well-being in advancing years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, successful ageing may depend - in part - upon an accommodating environment, and solutions to many of the problems faced by people in old age call for changes in society, perhaps particularly in our attitudes. Placing a greater value on the collective and individual wisdom of older people may facilitate this, as well as reminding ourselves of the indispensable contribution of our elders to society. The older person's capacity to adjust to life's inevitable losses is another important quality from which we all might benefit.

By Sarah Graham BSc (Psychology) MSc (Health Psychology)