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**How does age relate to lifelong learning?**

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**Abstract:**

**Recent medical and social advances have increased longevity throughout the world. However, cultural stereotypical perceptions may limit the quality of this extension to life.**

**People who conduct their lives in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in, are sometimes referred to as possessing "agelessness" and would appear to resist being culture-bound. This in-progress doctoral research focuses on the links between lifelong learning and age with a view to establishing possible connections between lifelong learning, "agelessness" and social wellbeing. It discusses emerging reflections on descriptors of "agelessness" and relates these to a positive view of ageing and lifelong learning, with a presuming contention that "agelessness" in a person enables them to choose to respond to learning opportunities throughout their lives.**

## Introduction

Recent biomedical, health care and social developments have contributed to longer life expectancy. There are a number of salient and often interconnecting reasons for this increased longevity. These are a combination of lowered mortality rates and higher life expectancy related to biological developments, behavioural influences, genetic dispositions, and environmental effects (Australian Bureau of Statistics- A.B.S. 2000b).

This has resulted in an increasing proportion of people at higher age ranges within the Australian population. According to the A.B.S. (1999) in 1998 the proportion of people aged 65 and over in Australia had tripled in the years since federation- 151,000 people in 1901 to 2.3 million in 1998. In addition, "The population aged 65 years and over is projected to increase rapidly... both in terms of numbers and as a proportion of the total population... to about 4.2 million in 2021 and between 6.4 and 6.8 million in 2051" (A.B.S.2000a).

Apart from proportion the length of time lived, on average, at higher ages is substantial. The Australian Life Tables indicate that on reaching 45 years of age the average years of life remaining are over 33 years for males and 38 years for females (A.B.S. 1995, in Australian Association of Adult and Community Education 1995, 6). For individuals, living longer has a benefit not often realised, "The silver lining of life expectancy calculations is that the longer you live, the longer your total expected life span becomes" (Crispell 1995, 4).

The number of older people is not limited to Western nations. The U.N. (1998) found that the total world population between 1970 and 1998 had swelled by 60% with the 'oldest-old' – those of eighty plus years increasing by 147%.

There is a statistical likelihood being that, on average, we will live to an increasing old age. How we live during those years has strong repercussions both for the individual and for society, especially as the median age of Australia's population in 1997 was 34 years and this is expected to rise by 2051 to 44-46 years (A.B.S. 1999).

## Policy issues

It is clear that governments are becoming concerned with the financial implications of an increasingly ageing population. Brooks (1996) predicts health care resource pressure from the elderly, a view supported by Fries (1990, 2354) who declares that, "As more people live longer, diseases of ageing will dominate the national health care priorities."

These economic issues are likely to increasingly merit ongoing political policy responses with extensions of life duration likely to have considerable social consequences, a social context which will need ongoing address. One salient aspect is that there is a growing social force of older people, at its most basic by force of numbers, but also in other areas such as accumulation of wealth and expectations of playing a meaningful and influential role in society. As Kersey (1997, 256-7) asserts "...there is no doubt that the soft and timorous voice of the self-effacing aged is growing stronger and will increasingly be heard."

**A further issue relates to inter-generational conflict which Neugarten (1972, 323) referred to by relating that, "...increased numbers of older persons, pose major social problems ... and their presence leads to new alignments between age groups." a concern also expressed by Biggs (1993). While societal interactions for all age groups might ideally be with empathetic understanding and acceptance, so that mutual advantage of societal living could be received equally by all, there would appear to be misunderstandings which might lead to antagonism and perhaps outright conflict.**

### **Images of the elderly**

**Historically the elderly have often been portrayed in negative ways. Shakespeare's Hamlet (1904, 954), submits that, "...old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum, and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with the most weak hams..." (Act 2 Scene 2). While Butler also related this pessimistically perceived view as:**

**An older person thinks and moves slowly...can no longer change or grow...he dislikes innovations...enters a second childhood...becomes irritable and cantankerous...the picture of mental and physical failure...he has lost his desire and capacity for sex...feeble, uninteresting, he awaits his death, a burden to society, to his family and to himself. (1975, 6 in Fielding, 1986, 11)**

**These stereotypical views reinforce perceptions of increasing chronological age as something to be avoided, if it were possible. However, longevity increases are likely, in the view of Olshansky, (1998, 52) to mean that, "...almost everyone either experiences or is a witness to senescence, the variety of physiological changes that accompany the passage of time." Olshansky further argues that, " ...the expression of senescence is inherently modifiable; increasing longevity without sacrificing health or adversely influencing the delicate social fabric of life will be an important and difficult challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."**

**Attention to the societal concerns and effects discussed are clearly needed, as it is evident that increased longevity has an increasingly important relationship to the way age may be viewed.**

### **Cultural perceptions of age**

**While chronological age has widespread societal usage and influence, there are many other concepts of age, such as biological age, functional age, optimal age or social age. Biological age according to Bitten and Cunningham (1985, 8 in Settersten and Meyer 1997, 233 [7]) is an individual's "...present position with respect to his [or her] potential life span. Thus, an individual's biological age may be younger or older than his [or her] chronological age." Powell, (1998, 4) refers to functional age as "...how well we are able to do things related to our life experience". Individually this could be different, such as a professional athlete's functional age being demonstrated by their comparative sporting capabilities at differing ages. Powell (1998, 6) further refers to optimal ageing as "...getting the best out of what is possible for as long as possible-physically, cognitively, socially, and psychologically". Optimal aging relates to a concept of full living "...in the context of the inevitable limitations that growing old places on us." Although living to our potential is involved in this concept there is an underlying inherent theme of inevitable reduction of capabilities. From these diverse ways of classifying age it can be suggested that whatever way age is labelled is only relative to the purpose for doing so.**

**Chronological age in Western society is used explicitly for ordering of school populations, qualification for voting and a wide range of legal citizenship measures. Settersten and Mayer (1997, 233 [8]) affirm that, "...chronological age... is an easily measured, objective, and universal attribute. As a result it has become a prominent criterion for classifying and ordering society." A view also supported by Neugarten and Neugarten (1987). However, despite its administrative usefulness, it can be argued that at present there appears to be an insidious labelling process occurring through the individual provision of date of birth for a diverse range of purposes without knowledge of how this information may be used.**

**Also, the concept of chronological age, it can further be argued, brings with it culturally limiting perceptions which are often based on stereotypes and ageism, and can perpetuate behaviour founded upon the myths and misconceptions engendered. Viewing individuals in these stereotypical ways might also be a key aspect in possible inter-generational conflict. Limiting beliefs based on chronological age can lead to restrictions on the way our lives are conducted -as Neugarten and Neugarten ( 1987, 29[6]) state- "Some people live in new ways but continue to think in old ways"- and clearly can also have important implications for the role of learning during the whole of our life.**

**Behavioural restrictions using age as a form of social control is demonstrated by the following of age norms (Neugarten and Neugarten 1987; Settersten 1997; Settersten and Mayer, 1997). The importance of the influence of life transitions on age norms occurring within "...socially relevant periods, age distinctions become systematized and rights and responsibilities are distributed according to social age" is highlighted by Neugarten and Neugarten (1987, 29) though Settersten and Hagestad (1996, 602) indicate that increased flexibility has occurred in the decades since the original studies by Neugarten.**

**Young (in Dean 1992, 1403) suggests that the use of chronological age can add to social difficulties and suggests recognition of age being private knowledge and not for public use, whereas Neugarten and Hagestad (1976 in Settersten, 1998, 181) initially referred to an "age-irrelevant society" as another functional age conception.**

**There are other allied issues relating to concept of types of age. For example, stereotyping of particular chronological age stages such as the "glorification" of youth, has in the discussions of McHugh (2000, 106) been overtaken by a focus on prolonging the mid-life period. McHugh further refers to Laws (1995) discussion of ageing as, "...an emplaced process...that there are many spaces and places thought suitable for one age but not another." Future directions involving concepts of age might be well advised to further investigate this emplacement as a means of understanding the societal relationship and usage of age.**

### **Perceptions of age and social wellbeing**

**The achievement of age can be viewed differently by individuals or within society. One possibility for an individual is to be resigned to a perception about what increasing age will bring with it. This may relate to perceived decreasing mental and physical faculties, to feeling an increased sense of powerlessness and perhaps even worthlessness regarding a role in society. Another view is to feel anger and rage inwardly and outwardly against a sense of injustice at increasing age. Within this view might appear resentment against the body, and fearfulness of disease, the concept of dying, and the financial instability. One commonly expressed view is that "ageing is like being increasingly penalised for a crime you never committed."**

Furthermore on a societal level, it may appear that people of higher chronological age are providing little in resource outcomes through non-participation or retirement within the context of national productivity. This view can certainly be refuted (Falk, Golding, and Balatti (2000), but nevertheless is a further indication that if age is a major determinant of perceived societal or personal role, then limitations may be being placed on the way an individual functions at different ages within their lives with implications both to society and to the individual.

With reference to the experience of ageing terms like successful ageing, ageing well, and productive ageing are often used, and for the purpose of this paper can be viewed within the framework of positive ageing and social wellbeing. Baltes and Baltes (1993, 5) refer to a multicriteria approach with many common characteristics frequently emerging in successful ageing research such as, "Length of life, biological health, mental health, cognitive efficacy, social competence and productivity, personal control and life satisfaction."

The White House Conference on Aging (1996) discusses social well-being as being indicative of social environmental support, through interdependence of generations and responsiveness to diversity, though the emphasis of the report is largely limited to an older population.

The Gerontological Society of America (in Kershner and Peagues 1998, 1445) has as its motto "adding life to years, not just more years to life". Although many general characteristics could be elucidated related to positive aspects of ageing, and to social wellbeing, Antonovsky's (1987 in Maddox 1991, 11) principal foundations for wellbeing would seem to reflect a useful personal focus in:

- (1) the capacity to understand ourselves and the expectations we and others share about ourselves;
- (2) the resources necessary to meet the expectable challenges, even the extraordinary challenges, of life in personally satisfying and socially acceptable ways;
- and (3) the attachment of meaning to life that makes pursuit of aging well seem relevant and compelling.

### What kind of longer life?

Quality of life is an important element in any positive process related to ageing, however, that which determines quality of life is arguable. Historically it is a subject discussed throughout time and through different cultures with little consensus being reached. Bonita, (1997, 1167) states one view that, "Alleviating the conditions of poverty, and equalising the life expectancy at birth, is essential to making a longer life worth living." Societal influences which assist in the creation of fairness can enable the individual to have increased self-determining opportunities.

George and Bearon (1980, in Brooks 1996, 277) "...conclude that health is a foundation for the subjective aspect of the quality of life in old age". Eubie Blake on reaching the age of one hundred in Kirkwood (1999, 63) confirms the importance that might be placed on care of the body when he comments that, "If I'd known I was going to live this long I'd have taken better care of myself".

While health is clearly important as a characteristic of quality of life, it could be suggested that there are other determinants which are also of a salient nature such as satisfaction and happiness as discussed by Campbell and others (1976, in Maddox 1991, 10). There is much support for the often expressed view that the need for

meaning in life is more important as we age (Jung 1961; Neugarten, 1968; Erikson, 1963; Frankl, 1978; in Baum & Stewart 1990), while other explanations include Gendlin's (1962 in Baum & Stewart 12, 1990) idea of "meaningful feelings... equating meaningful experience as passionate involvement."

While the various determinants of quality of life are often discussed within the context of ageing or disability they may be viewed homogeneously; the concept of quality of life needs to be focused on for any age.

### Cultural stereotyping based on age

Whatever perspective is viewed relating to quality of life, positive ageing and social wellbeing, the influence of culture can effect both individual and societal directions. Sargent (1986,48) affirms that, "Living in a culture our behaviour and values are limited in certain ways according to the expectations for behaviour and values which prevail in that particular culture." Cultural perceptions relating to age could, for example, limit involvement in learning throughout life. An illustration of this could be that an individual's concept of retirement might change their behaviour, thinking, self worth and perceptions of ability to attempt new challenges- the "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" thinking often suggested in common usage.

Perceptions both from society of acceptable behaviours and values to be exhibited at particular ages can create stereotypes from which it is difficult to differ without likely actual and implied societal pressure being administered. Sargent (1986, 51) further comments on societal limitations leading to being "...culture-bound. It is as if they are wearing tinted spectacles that cannot be removed.

Stereotypes which embody cultural age perceptions may disadvantage both society and the individual. Eglit (1989, 31) discusses how age discrimination in employment settings continues into the present. While Butler (1987 in Grant 1996, 10) further emphasises, "Traditionally, aging has been viewed as a continual process of decline. Unfortunately, this stereotyping results in systematic discrimination that devalues senior citizens and frequently denies them equality..." Fries (1990) refers to the high proportion, ninety-nine percent, of people of 75 years of age or below in the United States who are not living in nursing homes, a figure which seems contradictory to a prevailing stereotype, and Swindell (1999, 235) asserts that, "Many people in society have a negative view about the capabilities of the ageing population despite ample evidence from everyday life that the stereotypes they maintain are wrong."

Common perceptions can lead to personal fears of some perceived ageing effects such as cognitive deficiencies and physical limitations. Friedan (in Daniel 1994, 62) emphasises that ageing is "...so negatively stereotyped that getting old has become something to dread and feel threatened by."

This has particular importance in the messages society communicates in many ways. The media, for example, relates the societal valuing of youth, especially physical looks and movement, through body image and health, while seemingly providing negative portrayal of the perceived expectations and effects of ageing, or by simply omitting images and responses of those not adjudged to be attractive due to age.

These hidden and not so hidden messages may be influential in socialising individuals in society to expect behaviours, attitudes and presentation of people of differing chronological ages.

## Ageism

Ageism, age-based discrimination (Butler 1969 in Bytheway and Johnson 1990) has several unhelpful and harmful applications. Restrictions can occur in a number of ways- within society generally, through limiting messages related by the use of ageist language, within employment areas, and even by restrictions in health care as people age.

An illustration of the way ageist language is often used in a pessimistic and unhelpful manner is asserted by Nuessel (1982, 273):

The language used to depict the elderly is overwhelmingly negative in its scope. Moreover, many ageist terms are doubly offensive because they contain both ageist and sexist references. Such deprecatory language is a linguistic mirror of the pervasive individual and institutional ageism in our society.

A further example exists in the health care system where older patients can receive lesser service care than younger patients. Butler (1975, 893) referred to "The psychiatric profession's therapeutic nihilism toward the elderly..." In more recent years this issue continues to be raised and debated. Bernard (1998, 633) relates "...ageism is not only rife amongst the population at large, but also amongst many of those who care for older people in a professional capacity."

Evans (1997, 822) concludes that, "Ageism is as unethical as sexism and racism, since it focuses on a feature that cannot be altered. It is prejudice that old age is worth less than youth and deserves lesser care and expense". Ageism, by restricting the way people are viewed on the basis of their age is likely to limit the choice from opportunities, and can lead on from myths and misconceptions relating to ageing.

Amongst these potential fallacies are perceptions relating to health and physical capacities (Stahl and Feller 1990, in Brooks 1996), as well as intellectual capacities, attitude and inability to respond favourably to new learning situations. Keeton (1992, 41) further maintains that "...many researchers are beginning to conclude that the deterioration of aging brains has been greatly exaggerated."

## Personal adaptability and locus of control

The individual's ability to choose and control negative messages is an important issue. Sdorow (1990, 460) discusses Rotter's (1966) development of locus of control, being "...the extent to which you believe that you are in control of events in your life or that such events are controlled by factors beyond your control." Our perception of what is achievable might effect the way age is viewed and could be a salient element in the way we choose to live our lives.

The extent to which locus of control influences our thinking and actions is illustrated by Rawkowski and Hickey (1992, in Brooks 1996, 280) who confirm that consequential links which are made can relate to health problems when they "...found that attributions of health problems to old age contributes to mortality." Personal attributions leading to different ways of thinking might therefore be a factor in the way we physically age and perhaps even to an achieved desire to live longer.

## **Lifelong learning**

**From the discussions on age and cultural perceptions of society and on the individual, there is an important area of relevance to experiences of ageing. Lifelong learning both in informal and formal settings has received attention in recent times and can be viewed as critical to improving quality of life and as a possible important element in wellbeing in ageing. The impetus towards lifelong learning in recent times has been in response to societal challenges. Brown (2000, 6) relates that, "The key 1990's reports on lifelong learning are influenced by a broader mix of economic, employment, social, cultural and educational objectives reflecting the uncertain and rapidly changing contemporary times."**

**Key areas of lifelong learning are through formal and informal learning. Lifelong learning is often a key aim of formal institutional learning effecting teaching methodology and curriculum content. The characteristics that Candy, Crebert, and O'Leary (1994, 43-44) relate as being those of the lifelong learner, –"An inquiring mind...Helicopter vision...Information Literacy...A sense of positive agency...(and) A repertoire of learning skills" are those that might appear to need to be addressed most within the context of engagement in learning. Strategies such as risk-taking, and learning methodology, such as reflection related to involvement, application to issues, dilemmas and concepts, would appear to provide practical examples.**

**Engagement, utilising strategies that relate to Candy's characteristics, could then be viewed as part of a powerful process relative to lifelong learning and would emphasise the 'enabling and encouraging' aspects important to the lifelong learning process.**

**Assisting people to be independent learners (Candy et al, 1994, 121), is a key element with Foley (1995, 105) further asserting, "If lifelong learning is to occur then there must be an emphasis on learning to learn. It will be up to the learner to learn and not the providers of education and training".**

**Informal learning is a further component of lifelong learning. Candy (2000, 29) comments on "...the unfortunate tendency to confuse learning with schooling..." While governments tend to emphasise lifelong learning provision through institutional settings, Livingston (1998, in Harrison 2000, 101) relates the important emphasis on informal learning made by individuals.**

**Lifelong learning requires engagement and adjustment to change if characteristics of lifelong learning are to be incorporated. Whilst there may be different extents of involvement, the differing ways that individuals adjust to change would appear to be important in responding to lifelong learning. As Laing, (1992, in Fullan 1993, p.135) states, "Change is mandatory, growth is optional". Fullan (1993, 15) refers to "lifelong inquiry", in discussing capacity to change, where "Inquiry means internalising norms, habits and techniques for continuous learning."**

**However, it is also necessary to acknowledge the recent recognition that lifelong learning skills of self-reliance and student-centred learning begin in early life. For this to occur lifelong it would appear to be vital to establish processes whereby young children are encouraged to learn skills and methods which relate to key descriptors of lifelong learning, thereby repudiating a commonly held view that lifelong learning, for those open to the idea, "kicks in" after compulsory education.**

## Learning communities and the learning society

Whilst individual commitment is a key aspect in choosing to learn, the joining together of individuals into learning communities is likely to benefit effective lifelong learning within society (Butler 1989), which Fullan (1993, 136) further emphasises when he asserts, "The development of a learning society is a societal quest." The encouragement and nurturing of learning communities within a learning society would appear to benefit the ongoing changes necessary to promote lifelong learning.

The societal contours of the future are evolving with the complexities arising from longevity raising many issues. As Maddox (1991, 10) queries, "Can contemporary aging societies reach consensus about the future of aging they wish to construct?" It is clear that all members of the learning society will be engaging in learning of some kind continuously from birth through all years, to death.

For our society to be an effective learning society, the need for a differing view of age which resists and negates societal age-related restrictions, and encourages self-directed lifelong learners is essential to learning which benefits individuals as part of society.

### "Agelessness"

Some individuals despite perceived cultural influences throughout their lives (as earlier discussed), would appear to resist being culture-bound. These people are sometimes referred to as possessing qualities of "agelessness". As the use of this term is increasing in the popular literature, it can assist by being regarded as an emerging dimension of age, and by being relevant to an important area relating to individuals who seem less bound by age-related restrictions.

Despite the powerful cultural perceptions relating to age -including the seemingly overpowering proliferation of societal messages, both explicit and implied, these people, of any age, exhibit behaviours and values that do not follow cultural perceptions pertaining to age. For the purposes of the current investigation a person who is perceived to have agelessness qualities is defined as "conducting their life in ways that are not chronologically age stereotypical in relation to the culture they live in."

It is therefore important that a deeper understanding of the descriptive characteristics is investigated. Qualities of "agelessness" are not to be seen as a denial of the ageing process but as a view which can benefit the experience of ageing. Neither is it a belittling of people who are ageing. While respect based on age may be regarded differently in some cultures respect for personhood and on equality for all is promoted within this study.

### About the study

The thesis of this study is a focus upon the possibilities and nature of links between lifelong learning and "agelessness," with a view to establishing possible connections between lifelong learning, "agelessness" and social wellbeing. The presuming contention is that "agelessness" in a person enables them to choose to respond to educational opportunities throughout their lives. An assumption is made that learning is how we adapt to change.

As well as investigating the concept of agelessness related to people perceived as demonstrating attributable characteristics, the study will ascertain influences or critical life events that may have contributed to an "agelessness" mind-set. Insights into these processes and their linkage to lifelong learning may assist in encouraging and enabling individuals of any age to choose to attain an "agelessness" approach to the experience of ageing.

### The study as a whole

Initially it was intended to conduct an exploratory study to assist in compilation of descriptive characteristics and thematic groupings related to the concept of "agelessness". From the analysed data two focus groups will then discuss issues based upon the thematic groupings that arose. These will comprise of people of post-compulsory age who will be purposively chosen.

Panels of Experts Focus Groups who have expertise and knowledge in various disciplines, will then be chosen related to key underpinning thematic areas arising from the discussed thematic groupings of the pilot study and refined by the initial focus groups. These Panels of Experts Focus Groups will further reflect, probe and discuss concepts related to the prioritized descriptors within socio-culturally situated practice, and extend, refine, endorse or reject them, and otherwise potentially assist with emergent and changing themes and processes.

As a result of this analysis of focus group interactions and considering the linkages between Agelessness and Lifelong Learning an intensive biographical case study approach utilising interviews and narrative analysis. Three or four situated biographical case studies of a subject over their life's learning will then be conducted. The case studies will consist of biographical in-depth interviews using narrative analysis techniques discussing the evolved descriptors and possible constraints provided by situational contexts, such as business, home or community.

Whether adaptation and the ability to adapt was enhanced by critical life events will be addressed, as will responses to critical changes in surrounding support systems that call for adaptation and 'new learning' leading to perceived personal agelessness concept development.

Continuing acknowledgement will be made to any linkage between issues from the case studies and from indicators of lifelong learning and agelessness from the literature.

### About the Exploratory Study

Participants in the Exploratory Study were University of Tasmania Unistart Preparation participants in 2001. The program is designed to assist new students to the university in acculturation and learning skills development. The programme operated before commencement of the university year, and participants were people interested in learning who had enrolled in a range of faculties at the university.

Students were of a broad range of post compulsory education ages and were asked to assist in developing understanding of the concept of "agelessness".

After "agelessness" context development students were then asked "Think of someone you know – of any age – who seems to you to be an 'agelessness' person."

They were then asked "What key words would describe the characteristics they have, that have led you to think that." They recorded their responses without interaction.

Analysis of the exploratory study data was made using a Grounded Theory approach. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998, 12) this is, "...theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process." They further discuss that the researcher does not pre-empt results by perceiving initial theory constructs and:

...allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the "reality" than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work).

### Results and discussion of exploratory study

After preliminary analysis, where it was noted that of the 88 subject responses, only 1 failed to think of an "agelessness" person and one responded that they saw that person as themselves, a number of interesting thematic groupings of perceived characteristics of an "agelessness" person emerged.

Five categories were identified: Change, Involvement, Personal Attributes, Physical Appearance, and Attitudes to Age. Identification followed a grounded-theory approach which utilised an open coding process not based on pre-selection or related to any established theoretical underpinnings (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

(1) **'Change'**. This category includes characteristics related to 'risk-taker', 'questioner', 'free-thinker' and 'non-conformist'. For 'risk-taker' specific characteristics such as "adventurous" and "bold" were noted and comments such as "courage to succeed and fail" and "will always have a go" were recorded. 'Questioner' included "asks why", "curious", and "confronting of ideas and topics". 'Free-thinker' was typified by "open-minded" and "broad-minded" and explanations of "open for new ideas" and "open to change". While 'non-conformist' was taken to be personal adaptability and included "not stereotypical", and "unrestricted by the attitudes of others" and "does his own thing".

(2) **'Involvement'**. Sub-groupings of 'active', 'energetic' and 'passionate' are included in this category. Some 'active' characteristics were viewed as "physical", "spiritual" or "mental" while 'energetic' was associated with "vibrant", "hard working", "busy", and "vitality", with comments including "love of life" and "enjoys doing things". 'Passionate' characteristics were held to be "enthusiasm", and "dedicated" with comments such as "thirst for life" and "contributes ideas, energy and skills" and "fire for life and people" were prominent.

(3) **'Personal Attributes'**. Skills and qualities such as 'sense of fun/spontaneity', 'good communicator', 'positive thinking', 'caring for others', 'relaxed', 'child-like behaviour', and 'self-confident' were grouped together. 'Sense of fun/ spontaneity' was elicited as including "sense of humour", "bubbly", "fun loving" with other comments such as "believes in having a good time". The 'good communicator' combination included "sociable", "outgoing", "assertive", "friendly" and remarks included "relates to most people as a peer", "fit into any age group" and "good conversation and wisdom". 'Positive thinking' posited "optimistic" and "focused" with observations noted of "can do attitude", "not being self-limiting", and "think they can do anything at all". Caring for others' include a wide range of "helpful", "accessible", "understanding", "loving",

"warm", "compassionate", "generous" and "kind" with "interested in others" and "cares about everyone" typical related comments. 'Relaxed' related "laid-back", "non-stressed", "calm" and "doesn't worry." 'Child-like behaviour' included "big kid", "youthful play", "childlikeness-not childishness", and "naïve". 'Self-confident' was held to incorporate "self-reliant", "self-willed", and even "bulletproof" and "indestructible".

(4) 'Perception of Physical Appearance' was not as highly commented upon as other groupings and attributed characteristics of "healthy", "athletic", "look younger" and "bright interested eyes".

(5) 'Attitudes to Age'. The last category was 'Attitudes to Age' and consisted of phrased comments. These related to a range of loose conceptual comments which were made such as; "surprised at own biological age"; "doesn't worry about age"; "young at heart"; "relates easily to others of all ages"; "young thinker"; "learns new skills regularly"; "comfortable with their age"; "doesn't try to look like their young or old"; and "doesn't limit their occupations or activities to their age group".

### Summary of tentative findings

Some interesting questions arise from this Exploratory Study data to be taken up in subsequent research. One salient area to be investigated would appear to be the relationship between locus of control and the characteristics primarily mentioned. To what extent is there the possibility to choose perceived agelessness characteristics? A further interesting area for discussion would seem to relate to activation of characteristics of agelessness. Are there for example critical life events which have encouraged change?

The lesser role given to the area of personal characteristics of looking younger is to some extent contrary to popular perceptions and is worthy of further investigation.

The Pilot Study overall has presented some interesting preliminary data for focus study discussion together with linkage to other study variables.

### Summary and conclusion

Increasing longevity is likely to affect social organisation in many ways. One key area is in the likely financial strain being placed on government systems by longer pension periods of payment and by potential health care system usage by the elderly.

As playwright Copek, (in Roush 1996, 42) through one of his characters relates, "Our social system is based completely on the shortness of life." Wyndham, in his novel "Trouble with Lichen" (1963, 177) based on 'anti-gerone treatment' the discovery of a serum prolonging life, also weaves the issue of societal difficulties in responding to increased longevity, such as the,

"... prospect of three lifetimes spent at the factory bench...pensions even if the age of retirement were raised by a hundred years. Lack of opportunities for promotion...No fresh blood in anything. Rises in prices owing to increased demand by increased population. Breakdown of National Health Service faced by population problems..."

The novel concludes with forced change being responded to by a negative societal over-reaction.

**The economic pressure associated to increasing proportions of people of higher chronological ages in our society may be one stimulus to changing perceptions of people related to age. For individuals likely to live to considerably longer ages, on average, than previous generations, existing stereotypes may limit responses to ageing. As Kirkwood (1999, 11) affirms:**

**The challenge is to age as successfully as we can. For society, the challenge of successful ageing is a paramount issue touching on all aspects of life- social, economic, medical and spiritual. For the individual, the challenge is to reach old age in optimum health and to develop the resources and attitudes to preserve independence and quality of life for as long as possible.**

**This study has and will address areas of possible importance in individual societal adaptation to changing cultural perceptions of age, and will also ascertain influences or critical life events that may have contributed to elements of an "agelessness" mind-set.**

**Insights into these processes and their linkage to lifelong learning may assist in encouraging and enabling individuals of any age to choose to improve their wellbeing by understanding and restricting negative age-related influences.**

**A different way of regarding people that is not related to chronological age could be beneficial both economically and socially and is likely to have considerable implications for individuals and learning communities within the learning society.**

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