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"I'm more confident now than I ever used to be": a preliminary qualitative study of British older adults' perception and experience of aging positively

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: With the changing demographic of older adults population observed around the world, it is important that aging is not simply conceptualized as decline in functioning and physical health, but encompasses positive experiences that impact upon overall well-being. Looking at the aging experience in a particular sociocultural context allows for a more in-depth understanding that could then lead to promotion of positive aging and improvements in aging outcomes in that context.

Research Design and Methods: The current qualitative study explores through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis how UK adults have experienced aging. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim to look closely into their subjective experiences and perceptions of positive aging in the UK. Analysis was undertaken through the lens of self-determination theory.

Results: Participants maintained a sense of wellness and positivity despite the challenges they faced in their aged bodies and declining health. They demonstrated autonomy though self-acceptance and indulging personal interests, competence through generativity and preparedness, and relatedness through capacity for connection with others, and appreciating living harmoniously with those they cared.

Discussion and Implications: This study presents a conceptualization of positive aging that can be applied to understand the aging process and experiences of older adults more broadly, which could aid policy and interventions targeting older adults.

Keywords: positive aging, UK, qualitative analysis, aging well, well-being

Aging has traditionally been regarded negatively by society, where older adults are seen as vulnerable and frail (Löckenhoff et al., 2009), and aging is often associated with declines in health and quality of life (Diehr et al., 2013). Gerontological research has contributed to the negative aging stereotype, with a disproportionate amount of research focusing on the declines and dysfunctions associated with aging (Fernández-Ballesteros, 2011).

Conceptually, there is a skew toward biomedical perspectives and definitions of aging and this is reflected in the amount of literature with such a focus as well. Rowe et al.'s (1997) concept of successful aging was an improvement over the previous models of aging that tended to explain aging solely on the basis of biomedical components in that it included aspects such as social connections and productive activities as pillars of "successful" aging. Since then, there have been other more inclusive and holistic concepts of aging such as active aging (Walker, 2002), aging well (Cosco et al., 2013), and healthy aging (WHO, 2015). Many of these conceptualizations, however,

remain somewhat "ageist" in the sense that the predominant view is that aging is mostly negative and/or that they are built upon researchers' imposed views of a single and rigid model of "successful" aging (Douma et al., 2017).

However, the process and experience of aging need to be considered from a broader perspective, as not all experiences of aging are negative. In understanding aging processes and outcome better, one needs to take into account not only factors of physical health, functioning, and social engagement, but also aspects of well-being, personal resources, and life involvement, as well as extrinsic factors (Lewis, 2014; Urtamo et al., 2019), and varying in importance for each aging person (Teater & Chonody, 2020). Likewise, how older adults may overcome age-related adversities and remain resilient should also be considered (Cosco et al., 2017; Staudinger et al., 1995).

Despite the overall lack of emphasis on positive aging and a consensual definition, some research exists that have looked at the "positive" aspects of aging. For example, Black et al. (2012)

looked at older adults' involvement in the community, demonstrating how many older adults take pride in helping out with the wider community in ways they can, and are subsequently viewed as "role models" by their community members. Building on such research evidence, it is important that there is a framework for positive aging that provides a clearer and more in-depth understanding of the older adults' experience and what it means to age well in the sociocultural context in which one's aging happens, in this case, the UK.

Subjective interpretation of aging positively/well

There is also a need to understand the subjective experiences of older adults better, and building blocks of resilience and well-being in old age, analogous to what one may consider as "positive ageing." The perception of positive aging is often based on the older adult's own interpretation of what it means to age well, based on their personal views and background, which then has implications for their overall mood and appraisal of life (Hung et al., 2010).

A large discrepancy exists between how researchers define positive aging versus lay-person, which highlights that the literature presents a biased view that may not paint a true picture of how older adults today perceive of their own aging or what percentage of older adults are aging positively (Hung et al., 2010; Phelan et al., 2004). The percentage is higher in participant-defined (66.6%–87.4%) rather than researcher-defined (11.4%–34%) positive aging (Brown & Bond, 2016), which demonstrates that the subjective experience of aging differs from biomedical appraisals of aging.

Furthermore, in taking a lifespan perspective, it is important to note that older adults are still on the developmental pathway where their aspirations, needs, and wishes matter, as opposed to perceiving old age as the end-of-life stage where fulfillment of such goals may be ignored. Research has found older adults deriving similar levels of satisfaction and enjoyment from activities centered around self-development and learning as young adults (Reichstadt et al., 2010), and wishing to continue being an active member of the society, making meaningful contributions by ways of giving back (e.g., volunteering, generative activities) (Black et al., 2012).

The present study: aims and rationale

The present study thus aimed to develop a deeper and broader understanding of positive aging through exploration of British older adults' own interpretations of what it means to age positively, carefully analyzing their reflective narratives of positive aging. Actual knowledge about the aging experience is still lacking (Soares et al., 2014), and even more so, what older adults themselves may consider to be an "ageing well" experience. It is the lay-view approach we adopt in the study, inquiring what older adults' subjective experience of aging and the aspects of their lives that give them meaning, happiness, and purpose regardless of their objective conditions or challenges faced with. The main research question was: "What is positive ageing?" The aim of the study was to use the participants' responses to construct a framework outlining components of positive aging that can be used for informing older adults aiming to age well and for guiding aging well programs and policies in the UK.

Importantly, this study was conducted at the height of COVID-19 and it was generally believed that loneliness and mental health issues would rise as the result of enforced social isolation. This is especially relevant as in the UK, older adults were considered vulnerable and told to isolate themselves at home at all times, which leaves one to think that older adults would be suffering, and struggling to keep well psychologically and emotionally.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through Trent Ageing Panel, which is a panel of local older adults who take interest in initiatives and research relating to aging/older adulthood. The study advert went out in a newsletter and interested parties contacted the main researcher to take part in the study. Anyone over the age of 55 and interested in sharing their views and experience of positive aging were invited to take part in the study. Attempts were made to recruit as diverse a sample of older adults in terms of gender, age, and other background factors, as much as possible. However, as we sought participants' own views regarding what constituted positive aging and thought that this would not depend on their health conditions, living arrangements or age, we did not recruit participants on the basis of these categories and paid little attention to them except for what arose in the interview. Fifteen participants took part in the study, 10 of whom were female and five were male. The youngest participant was 56 and the oldest was 86. Eight participants lived with their spouse, while seven lived alone. Living arrangements were not a limiting factor for participation within this study, nor were there any other exclusion criteria. Participation for this study was voluntary and each participant was gifted a £20 online shopping voucher as a token of appreciation. Full participant details can be found in Table 1.

Materials

It was agreed upon by the researchers that semi-structured interviews would be most suitable for this study. Semi-structured interviews accommodate for the researcher to intuitively respond to the comments of the participant and thus foster a naturally flowing conversation and, subsequently, a rich and authentic data set. The schedule comprised of thirty-six questions in total, designed as such to be highly flexible in which questions are prioritized, skipped, or moved around as the researcher sees fit depending on how the interview progressed. The full interview schedule can be found as a supplementary material.

Procedure

The study was designed in line with the British Psychological Society's code of Ethical Practice. Full ethical approval was obtained from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Nottingham Trent University before any element of the study commenced. Full written consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interview, with further spoken consent given at the beginning of each recorded interview. The interviews concluded with a spoken debrief and a chance for the participants to discuss any thoughts or questions that they may have regarding the research. Promptly afterwards, the participants were emailed a written debrief which further contained direct contacts for relevant telephone support and support groups, should they have felt they required it.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Age	Gender	Living arrangements	Highest level of education	Previous occupation
Amy	77	Female	Alone[a]	Bachelor's degree	Headteacher
Catherine	67	Female	Alone	Bachelor's degree	Admin / housing / charity
Ellie	61	Female	With spouse	Vocational qualification/HND	Procurement
Frank	69	Male	With spouse	Bachelor's degree	Solicitor
Gerald	75	Male	Alone	Vocational qualification/NVQ	Leakage inspector
James	68	Male	With spouse	PhD	Astronomer
Kate	75	Female	With spouse	GCE/O-level	Sales
Lauren	56	Female	Alone	A-level	Secretary
Louisa	80	Female	Alone	Master's degree	Teacher
Michelle	65	Female	With spouse	A-level	Credit controller / admin / secondary school cover supervisor
Rebecca	70	Female	With spouse	Teacher training certificate	Teacher
Rosie	71	Female	With spouse	Bachelor's degree	Teacher
Sam	78	Male	With spouse	Master's degree	Headteacher / associate tutor
Thomas	86	Male	Alone	Engineering qualification	Chartered engineer
Zoe	76	Female	Alone[a]	Honour's degree	Education welfare officer

Note. A-level = Advanced Level; GCE = General Certification of Education; HND = Higher National Diploma; NVQ = National Vocational Qualification; O-level = Ordinary Level. All names have been changed to pseudonyms.
[a]Widowed during the pandemic.

Interviews were conducted between April and June 2021 by the first and second authors, both of whom have extensive experience with qualitative interviews. Interviews were completed online using Microsoft (MS) teams, which accounted for government restrictions regarding social mixing at the time, as well as allowing for ease of access for the participants. The interviews were recorded using the built-in recording software in MS Teams. Both audio and video were recorded to ensure the interviews were captured with complete clarity. The recordings were manually transcribed, in full, by the researchers. In order to ensure anonymity of the participants, their real names were replaced with pseudonyms at this stage. The average duration of the interviews was 57 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting 48 minutes and the longest 114 minutes. Once 15 interviews had been completed, it was agreed upon by the researchers that full data saturation had been reached and no further interviews were conducted. A method analogous to code frequency count (see Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) was used. The researchers coded the data for each batch of 5 interviews, to then compare the number of new codes in the subsequent 5 interviews from the earlier 5. This method was chosen for two reasons: (1) to compare the codes from a new batch of interview data with the previous batch as aforementioned, and (2) to compare the codes between coders and interviewers and use this as the opportunity to compare notes to agree on the richness of the new data trickling in and the point of saturation. The third batch of 5 interviews gave weight to existing codes but added few new codes and after scrutinizing the transcripts for all the transcripts again, the researchers agreed that saturation was reached.

The researchers were wary of the fact that the interviews were conducted online, which carried the advantage of the participants feeling comfortable and safe at home and yet may have led to frustrations from their part should any technical issues have arisen. Therefore, researchers tried to remain as patient and helpful as possible, offering to wait or help resolve an issue when/if they are uncomfortable. Also considering the potential impact of the lockdown on their overall well-being, the researchers at the beginning of each interview checked with the participants to ensure that they were well enough. The researchers were mindful of the impact of any language or choice of words with negative connotations or negatively stereotyping, and tried to speak as neutrally as possible, and avoid use of pronouns or grouping words that may make the participants feel distanced or "othered."

Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the chosen method of data analysis for this study. It was selected as the methodology of choice as it particularly lends itself to the study of positive psychological phenomena (Smith, 2017) which, in the case of this research, is the psychological phenomenon of positive aging. Through an intensive period, the researchers fully immersed themselves within the data, repeatedly reading the transcripts in endeavor to capture the individual experiences of the participants in as authentic a manner as possible (Larkin et al., 2006).

The analysis was conducted in steps and was conducted in a collaborative way similar to Richards and Hemphill (2018). The collaborative analysis process involved two of the researchers (first and last authors) leading the initial parts of the analysis (coding, initial theme generation and quote selection) and a third researcher (second author) who was also one of the interviewers stepping in at the final theme selection phase. The two researchers convened regularly to discuss the progress with the data collection and coding (as described in the earlier part on analysis by batches), deciding on the saturation points, independently coding the data but at regular intervals discussing the codes and initial themes, to then finally arrive at the final themes and quotes based on what they agreed upon the most. Any major discrepancies on deciding on the final sets of the themes and subthemes and the quotes were then resolved together with third researcher's independent views and a final meeting between all three researchers led to the final themes as agreed upon by all researchers. The analytic procedure was chosen to ensure the rigor and, and all steps of the analytical process were taken with due care and attention to ensure that an honest representation of the participants' experiences could be delivered.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed a set of core elements for embracing positive aging and four superordinate themes were established (see Table 2). Having secure relationships with family and friends, of all ages, equated to the importance of *Living harmoniously*. The second superordinate theme is a celebration of their copacetic abilities in *Making life meaningful*. The next superordinate theme discusses three pillars that formed the *Psychological foundations for healthy ageing* for the participants. These themes served as foundations for good mental health and well-being and provided motivation for positive behaviors. Finally, despite sharing experiences of positive aging, participants also identified challenges as captured by the concluding superordinate theme *Negotiation the realities of ageing*, highlighting the limitations of an aging body and perceptions of living within the confines amongst the larger social context.

Living harmoniously

The people with whom the participants shared their lives with undoubtedly played an integral role in their experience of positive aging. Having a variety of supportive and healthy relationships, with friends and family members alike, offered the participants a secure environment in which they felt they could be themselves. The following two subordinate themes are a celebration of the joy that a diversity of connections brought to the lives of the participants, both intra-generationally and inter-generationally.

Intimate relationships

For the participants who still had a significant other, this relationship was paramount. Many spoke with affection toward their spouse/partner, appreciating the companionship and the deeper understanding their relationship allowed them:

> (To husband) Our relationship, it's good, isn't it? "Good in parts", he says (both laugh). Yeah, well, we do things together, we do things separately as well. So, it's good because I think you need to have some interests of your own as well. But we like to go walking, so we like walking together. We jive together when we're allowed. (Rosie, 71)

However, intimate relationships extended beyond partners/spouses. Many of the participants highlighted the importance of having cultivated a healthy group of friends with whom they share life's joy and sadness with:

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Living harmoniously	Intimate relationships
	Intergenerational connectivity
Making life meaningful	Growth through personal pursuits
	Value in generativity
Psychological foundations for healthy aging	Preparedness and adaptability
	Capacity for connection
	Self-acceptance and autonomy
Negotiating with the realities of aging	Experience of the aging body
	Aging and society

And I've got a couple of very close friends and I know that they will be there for me if I have any problems. And that's a nice feeling to have, I think, that you've developed those relationships within the family and outside the family. (Catherine, 67)

Many also shared friends with their partners, and enjoyed the time they would spend together as a larger group:

> We all became eighty within about three months of each other. So rather than having parties separately we decided to have a long weekend in London. With our spouses and so on. We called it our two-hundred-and-fortieth birthday party. (Thomas, 86)

Intergenerational connectivity

Participants highly valued the color, meaning and energy connections with people of different generations brings into their lives, embracing them with willingness and joy. Sam (78) spoke of living "vicariously through his grandchildren" and similarly, Catherine (67) shared the affection she has for her grandson and what he brings into her life:

> We are very close, very close you know. And if I don't go round, he asks where I am, 'is nanny coming?' and all this sort of thing. He does come to me for comfort and what have you, you know, if he's fallen over and he's crying, whatever, he'll come you know, 'Nanny! Nanny!', sort of thing. He has brought an awful lot into my life. (Catherine, 67)

Speaking of her relationship with her daughter, Rebecca discusses the intriguing situation of role reversal with her daughter:

> It is interesting because the roles start to reverse slightly. They'll still phone me up, like yesterday it was 'how long do I cook meat for, mum?'. But actually, I was really down the other week, oh you get upset sometimes you know, so you phone your daughter, and she takes that parent role. (Rebecca, 70)

The enjoyment of intergenerational living also extended to outside of the family. In speaking about former colleagues and friends, Frank (69) shared his view that "age is immaterial," and how he learned so much from one another, "you learn as much as you teach, and vice versa." James speaks fondly of his group of friends with whom he shares trust and support, one of whom being a generation above himself:

> There was a little group of us, we were neighbors actually, and we called ourselves the committee, and we used to go off and do things. You know, we'd go to the theatre, or we'd go—we took him to Paris when he was about ninety and got him up the Eiffel tower. (James, 68)

Making life meaningful

By having strong psychological foundations, the participants were imbued with the ability and motivation to engage fully with life. All of the participants seemed to have found ways

of making life meaningful, and enjoy themselves. James (68) highlighted the significance of meaningful life, and his observations of himself and others, that a "lot of that comes from personal relations but also doing things you feel that are worthwhile."

Growth through personal pursuits

Pursuing learning and other personal interests took many forms to keep life fun, their minds active, and their bodies moving for our participants. James (68) said, rather casually, "when I stopped learning I'd, I'd just as soon lie down and be put in a box really". For Sam, the time presented through retirement allowed him to be able to engage with learning, taking a passionate interest of his to a new level:

> One of the things I am trying to do is to learn New Testament Greek, and so that I can read the original, not the original manuscripts, but the original text. And I've been working on it for a fair bit of time, I'm teaching myself. (Sam, 78)

Lauren, on the other hand, preferred an activity that was more mindful, that gave her a sense of calm and rewards:

> With gardening, you can be on your own all day and it's therapeutic. And if you do something it's great, it's good for you. And then when you see the results of your efforts, it makes it even more worthwhile. (Lauren, 56)

But not everything had to have a point. James spoke of the delights of being able to indulge in an activity simply for the fun of it, with no pressure to ever be any good. Explaining it as the purest form of joy, he shared:

> One of the fun things about retiring is you can kind of go back a bit more to being a kid where, you know, you can just have a go at things even if you're not very good at them if you see what I mean. So, I'm trying to do a bit of painting even though I know I'm not very good at it. (James, 68)

Value in generativity

Some participants preferred to fill their days with engagements that felt worthwhile, which for most was in the form of generativity, or giving something back. For Catherine, this was in the natural simplicity of spending time with her grandson, equally filling each other's hearts:

> I give him so much time and I listen to him, and I give him my attention because these are precious moments […] he'll just come up and say,' Cuddle! Cuddle!', you know, it means you've got to pick him up, put him on your knee and give him a cuddle. And to me that just makes my heart go!/ laughs/. (Catherine, 67)

The opportunity to volunteer was taken up by many of the participants. For some, it was the chance to give something back, in thanks for the support they themselves had previously received. Rosie talks of working for a support group for those whose children have the same condition as her own:

> My son was born with tracheoesophageal fistula. There was a support group for them called TOFs; I'm involved with that […] I was on the end of a telephone for new parents whose child had the same condition and, you know, I got lots of phone calls from people, erm, just to listen really, I mean, you know, I can't offer any medical advice, but I could listen to them. And erm, you know, somehow, they always felt better at the end, I don't really know why but I think it was giving them the opportunity to voice their worries and anxieties. (Rosie, 71)

Further still, some participants relished in the opportunity to become more involved with their community, doing what they could in hopes of making a positive change for future generations:

> I'm in a [political] Party so I attend online, the [location] branch meeting and the constituency. And then there's a women's forum, which has also been meeting online, so I go to that. And then, last week I think um, a meeting about the key power NHS public, that's a local group, well, there are groups in different parts of the country. (Zoe, 76)

Psychological foundations for healthy aging

Three core psychological foundations for positive and healthy aging were identified. Participants discussed how they maintained their mental and psychological well-being, and how they formed the basis of their motivation for engaging positively with a later life stage. As Louisa (80) puts it, "you should look ahead, look ahead and think about even if not actively prepare".

Preparedness and adaptability

Through navigating life's unexpected turns and traumas, some participants felt that this had strengthened them with a certain hardiness to take on new life changes. The best examples of this sense of preparedness and adaptability was offered by Louisa, who shares how she has gained resilience over time from various experiences:

> I admit, 100%, it is easier if life has put you in different situations. And I, you know, you've moved to a different country. As a child, suddenly being transported from a village in Yorkshire err, across to the other side of the world […] That was the first shock. So, it's so, you know, life presents you with these opportunities. Also, health wise, I mean you know, brushes with cancer and things like that, help you. (Louisa, 80)

She continues discussing her thoughts on the theme through highlighting the importance of cultivating a life of one's own and preparing herself with the stability necessary to adapt to a new era in life:

> I think really from a very young age, partners should be focusing on their own lives as well as their joint life. Have their own friends, have shared friends, but have separate friends and interests and things, and make space for each, make space for themselves as well as space for each other. (Louisa, 80)

Like many other participants, Rebecca had direct experiences of exercising adaptability. The example she chose to share is one of moving on from her life in teaching and finding her new place within the U3A (University of the Third Age). She embraced entering a new environment wherein she could be equally as engaged and use her time valuably:

> I gave up teaching at 60 coz you suddenly felt, 'actually I'm not as relevant anymore'. And the children would, you know, they always call you mum when you're teacher and they started calling me grandma and I thought 'this is time to give up' […] even a year out of teaching I wasn't current and that's when I found U3A. And I am now chairman of the local U3A group. And I've been in it for nine years now. (Rebecca, 70)

Capacity for connection

Innate to the participants' experiences was their capacity for connection. They all showed a great appreciation of family and friends, found genuine value within the relationships, and made themselves open for meaningful connections with friends and community members:

> I didn't know a single soul except my family, my son and my daughter who had moved into the area um, and I thought, 'well, I'm not going to sit here and do nothing. I am going to meet people'. So, first of all I joined a community group, and then the U3A. (Kate, 75)
>
> I think that's a very important thing in life, knowing who you can rely on and who will be there for you in times of upset or what have you. (Catherine, 67)

Also, the capacity for connection can go beyond the simplicities of needing a secure base of family and friends. In the following quote, Louisa eloquently explains that the value of connection goes beyond the surface and that through connection with others she was able to connect more with herself:

> It's really interconnectivity, isn't it? It's connecting with other people, or I suppose even connecting with yourself. (Louisa, 80)

Self-acceptance and autonomy

Sam (78) defined positive aging as "having an outlook where you don't mind getting old". Many of the participants shared that they had to first navigate through the inevitable trials and traumas of existing on this plane. Through the wisdom gained from life experience, they came to embrace self-acceptance and autonomy. The participants happily accepted themselves as they are, and didn't feel confined to the expectations of age:

> I'm not defined by age […] I'm not old. I think of ninety as being old, and when I get to ninety, I will think of one hundred as being old, if I live that long. (Louisa, 80)

James, in the following quote, expressed that he no longer felt beholden to perceived thoughts of how he believed others my view him. A simple, yet strong, reclamation of autonomy:

> I think one good thing of getting older is that you care less what other people think of you. And that's freeing, you know. (James, 68)

Most powerful was the kindness the participants were able to show toward themselves:

> I think I'm not so hard on myself now because I accept that I'm not infallible, We're all human beings, we all have folds. And so, I've learnt to sort of identify some of mine and try to accept them or change them. And if I think, 'well, I'm too old to change that way', I just think, 'well, I have to accept that that's the way I am'. But it's not a negative thing, I find it quite sort of liberating and positive. (Catherine, 67)

With strength and simplicity, Rosie adds to the discussion:

> I'm more confident now than I have ever used to be. (Rosie, 71)

Negotiating with the realities of aging

While participants found ways of flourishing in their older age as the other themes suggest, they also highlighted the challenges that accompany the aspect of aging positively. However, many embraced the realities with courage, resilience and determination and shared they will not give up or give in so easily.

Experience of the aging body

Almost every participant noted the aging of the body and mind as the most negative experience in older age and the biggest challenge they face. While most participants tried to lead an active life, many were concerned by the tangible deterioration of their everyday functioning and capacities. For Frank, experiencing the gradual reduction in his capabilities was quite striking, as a hobby he especially enjoyed steadily became a different experience:

> What's bad is you're almost measuring your own decay. […] I'm a very keen skier and I'm very aware that my fitness and ability now, and my courage, it's different to what it was when I was 60, which is very different to what it was when I was in my thirties. (Frank, 69)

While some participants were concerned about physical limitations, many also worried about the decline in their cognitive abilities. Though she reduces her worry with a laugh, Amy's very real concern and experience was echoed by many:

> I'm interested in learning things, doing something different, but now my mind doesn't, doesn't take it in like it used to do/laughs/. (Amy, 77)

Participants also highlighted the importance of holistic well-being, of keeping both body and mind healthy. Rebecca noted this as the primary goal and foundation for positive aging:

> What worries me is that positive ageing, I think, should be keeping fit and healthy, and I don't do that as much as I should. And so, I think positive ageing is keeping your brain

going, which I definitely do. Keeping your body fit, which is a bit harder cause I'm, well, as I say, my knees have been bad, so I've not been doing exercise. (Rebeca, 70)

Aging in society

The other major challenge the participants faced was society's ageist attitudes. They felt that they were seen in a negative light and misunderstood generally. Michelle was not alone in discussing the degrading way she was often spoken to as an older person in society:

> I think there's probably a general tendency to patronise older people, and to think 'oh yes dear' sort of thing, oh yeah 'oh poor you' kind of thing. […] And the sort of falsetto voice that people put on, the way you do when you talk to small children. (Michelle, 65)

Participants also noted that society is generally centered around younger generations and their needs, preferences and lifestyle often overlooked as highlighted in the following quotes:

> What upsets me is that fashion is aimed at youngsters, and it's crazy because I'm the person with money […] so why does nobody think about the body image of an older person and design fashion that isn't frumpy, you know? So, fashion, I don't think they think about the older people. (Rebecca, 70)
> We seem to have a culture which is orientated towards the young. (James, 68)

Some participants also mentioned that they are under-represented in the society and felt that their voices should matter more. Considering the rapidly aging population in the UK, this is something that they felt that the government should act upon improving older adults' inclusion and representation in the society. Within the recent context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this lack of care and inclusion became more evident:

> I think err governments just don't understand, and systems don't understand […] without wishing to be overtly political, at the beginning of the pandemic, older people, particularly vulnerable older people, were actually cast aside as if they were not worth bothering about. (Louisa, 80)

Somewhat defiantly, and certainly with strength, Rebecca stated the voice that the older generation still has, and that the government need to hear it:

> They'd like to discount the older generation as being old people that are not worth bothering with, they can't because politically etcetera there's a lot of us, so they have to you know, accept that we've got a voice. (Rebecca, 70)

Discussion

The present study examined in depth what it meant for older adults living in the UK to age positively. The findings revealed foundations key to positive aging for British older adults, such as living harmoniously with others, making life meaningful, having healthy psychological foundations as well as the ability to negotiate with the realities of aging and not giving up. The themes highlight the multidimensional and complex nature of positive aging that goes beyond good physiological health, highlighting socio-emotional components and the other- and future-oriented nature of positive aging. Furthermore, our findings underscore the need to take into account the older adults' own subjective and intentional experience and appraisal of their aging and what they make of it, as much of the positivity in their lives originated from their meaning making processes rather than the objective realities of aging per se. Our conclusion is somewhat akin to Douma et al. (2021), who have found that older adults experienced relatively good subjective well-being even when their geographical life-space is restricted due to advance age or illnesses. As Douma et al. (2017) point out, older adults tend to be viewed as a homogenous group although their experiences, preferences and expectations vary greatly by age, gender, cultural background, health conditions and so on. Noting this, more research that tells a coherent narrative around what constitutes positive aging across groups of older adults is needed, which can also lead to important suggestions for interventions.

Theoretically, our findings align with some of the well-known social psychological theories/models. Self-determination theory (see Ryan et al., 2008) applies rather well as the conceptual framework for organizing and interpreting the phenomenology of positive aging in our study. The three basic psychological needs, namely, *autonomy, competence*, and *relatedness* as argued by Ryan et al. (2008) could be considered determinative of living an holistically good life in old age (Dendle et al., 2021). Autonomy is evident in the themes "Growth through personal pursuits" and "Self-acceptance and autonomy"; competence is shown in "Preparedness and adaptability" and "Experience of the ageing body"; relatedness is reflected in "Living harmoniously," "Value in generativity," "Capacity for connection," and "Ageing and society." Some experiences or activities meet multiple psychological needs, where one component leads to experiencing others. For instance, "Valuing generativity" demonstrates relatedness through altruistic connections but also connects with a sense of meaning and purpose, implying competence. Additionally, "Capacity for connection" and "Intimate relationships" encompass both autonomy and relatedness, as many participants expressed the need for their own social group outside of family and unique from their spouse, showing autonomy through the desire and ability to relate to others meaningfully.

The emphasis placed on maintaining and strengthening meaningful social relationships also resonate with the socio-emotional selectivity theory, in that older adults in our study prioritized and focused on their most important social ties and derived positive emotions from being in contact with them (e.g., Carstensen, 2021; Uchino & Rook, 2020). The findings, therefore, do not only highlight the multidimensional nature of positive aging but also that the aspects and ingredients for positive aging may be mutually dependent on one another, thus needing to be mutually promoted as well in any interventions or programs that may be designed for aging positively.

Furthermore, our findings call for a more socio-culturally situated understanding of positive aging, as the sociocultural context seems to have had an impact on the experience and construal of aging for older adults living in the UK. Considering

a contextual-developmental-functional approach (see, 2007) for instance, it is important to note that society and one's surroundings and affordances would contextually shape one's understanding and lived experience, in this case of aging, and this would apply to how aging happens for our participants in the UK. Older adults' direct experience with their family, community, larger social landscape, and society at large, as well as the perceived expectations and social norms around being an older adult shaped their experience and beliefs. For instance, although the UK is considered an individualistic society, relatedness featured as an important theme for aging positively. "Living harmoniously," which was one of the superordinate themes, highlighted the significance of close social and emotional connections with others which calls for interventions and programs that can help older adults build and maintain such ties. Our theme "ageing and society" touches upon how older adults in our study were aware of how they were aging within the particular social context they lived in, and how they thought that the larger society had an important role to play in positive aging and in becoming more inclusive.

The emphases found in the significant role of "connectedness" with close others, the young generation and the society in our participants' account of positive aging highlights the need of interventions and policies to improve older adults' connectedness, belonging and meaning making in various social spheres, a message that should be taken more earnestly by researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

While the present study bears many merits, there are limitations that should be noted. First, participants were recruited locally through an older adult volunteer panel, and with the relatively homogenous sample, it may be difficult to generalize the findings to the whole of the country. Most importantly, the research had to be conducted within the confines of government imposed social distancing measures, requiring the interviews be conducted online for which MS Teams was utilized. This led to biased sampling as it required participants to have a high comfort level with technology in order to participate, and additionally created the unwanted exclusion of those less comfortable with technology. We note that our participants were white and that many of them were from middle to upper middle class, had high education levels, and have held professional jobs before retirement (some of them were still working part-time, continuing on with their professional/expertise areas). As such, we acknowledge that our findings and the conceptualization of positive aging may be somewhat limited and specific to a subset of the population and suggest future studies to include a more diverse sample, and especially those who may not enjoy relatively comfortable and financially secure lives. Lastly, we note that we have invited a broad range of older adults and thus both the experience and views of aging may have varied largely across the participants.

Along with exploring positive aging with a more diverse population of older adults in the UK, we suggest that more research is conducted with cultural background in mind. It might be the case that older adults with different cultures of origin (e.g., White British vs. ethnic minorities, older adults in other countries/cultural zones) conceptualize and experience positive aging somewhat differently. It may be that the significance of social capital—e.g., both quality and quantity of social networks—may be higher in older adults from a particular cultural zone (e.g., East Asia) than in the UK, although we have observed that even with British older adults intimate and strong social relationships mattered for aging well. Some of our participants, when invited to give further comments and suggestions, noted themselves that family relationships mattered in their lives more than they had initially thought and urged us to look into the role of family in positive aging more deeply. In summary, positive aging for those from the minority and lower socioeconomic status needs to be conducted in order for us to add further weight and clarity to the concept the present study aimed to establish. In line with the contextual-developmental-functional approach (see Kağıtçıbaşi, 2007), it would be worth exploring positive aging in relation to how it is understood and shaped by the unique context and opportunities presented to older adults belonging to different groups and socioeconomic statuses. Based on our findings, we also highlight the value of further exploring and developing the concept of relational autonomy, which combines different needs in a way that may be more beneficial for positive aging than each of the components separately.

Finally, we argue, in line with Decancq and Michiels' (2019), that it is important to consider aging with the older adults' own perspectives for what it means to age well. Our findings add further evidence that aging is more than a general decline of physical and psychological functioning, and that the meaning making in the everyday life of an older person deserves more attention as it accounts for a large part of the aging experience. Future research should incorporate such considerations in exploring and measuring successful and positive aging, starting from a more holistic view of aging that includes both objective and subjective criteria.

Conclusion

The findings from the present study demonstrate that one can view their aging in a positive light, and that this sense of aging well entails positive experience across various domains of life. All of the British older adults in this study shared that they did not perceive aging negatively and were doing what they can to lead a meaningful and active lives. With the present findings, we define positive aging as subjective, intentional experience and multidimensional construction of aging well. The themes that account for positive aging also demonstrate that one's health should be looked at holistically, as participants shared that they need strong social and psychological capital as well as physical health for positive aging. This study offers a definition and conceptualization of positive aging that enhances understanding of older adults' aging processes. We note that the study had limitations with sampling and would thus urge future research to explore this concept with more culturally and socioeconomically diverse samples of older adults.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available online at *The Gerontologist*.

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