



Creating New Meanings For Old Age

Plans and Projects After Eighty

Edited by
Isabella Paoletti

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To Sergio Mattarella, who accepted reconfirmation as President of the Italian Republic at the age of 81 for a mandate of 8 years, with immense esteem and appreciation for his constant attention and active presence to defend democracy, human rights, and peace.

Preface

I had been working on issues related to the oldest old adults for a while,¹ but I decided to write this book when one day while walking home, I saw a poster advertising a photo exhibition: “We are Humans-Cortona on the move 2021.”, held in the town of Cortona, Italy, in the Summer 2021. It showed an oldest old couple, they looked very friendly and happy (Retrieved 21 March 2024, from: <https://www.cortonaonthemove.com/en/2021-exhibition/>). As I looked at the poster, I reflected on the fact that it seemed necessary to explicitly state that this couple were humans. In other words, oldest old people appear often socially produced as out-cast, less human than younger people. At the core of this book lies a moral commitment to combat ageism and defend the human rights of oldest old adults.

Perugia, Italy

Isabella Paoletti

¹I had just written the chapter: Paoletti, I. (2023) Drawing attention to the oldest old women, in *Older Women in Europe: A Human Rights based approach*, 101–121, London: Routledge.

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About This Book

This edited volume shows that having plans and projects, being involved in life is possible after 80, including those with disabilities. A significant body of empirical literature documents that a sense of purpose in life is associated with a reduced risk in relation to numerous diseases and even to delayed mortality. Maintaining an active role until the end of life, also despite some forms of disability, is very important for the oldest old adults to preserve their physical and mental health. The book proposes a radical change in perspective by addressing the prevalent ageist culture that tends to relegate the oldest old to isolation, irrelevance, and decay. The book is structured in two parts. The first part presents key issues and concepts for the understanding of the condition of the oldest old people, such as ageism, the specific advantages and difficulties of oldest old people living in rural areas, and the relevance of transportation for the effective inclusion of oldest old adults. Moreover, it presents and discusses the impact of new imagery on ageing created by literature. The second part documents the active involvement of oldest old people in various activities, employing constructivist perspectives. Qualitative studies (discourse analysis, participatory research, case studies, content analysis) describe oldest old adults' involvement in meaningful and worthwhile activities such as art, dance, cultural initiatives, work, and volunteering that make them feel happy, worthy, connected, and full of life. These studies

highlight the effects that such participation has on their lives, well-being, and health, the difficulties they find in participating, and what favours their inclusion. The studies in this edited volume combat widespread ageist attitudes at both interactional and institutional levels, shifting the focus from loss and decay to highlighting the adaptability, inner strength, resilience, and wisdom of oldest old adults. This is not an attempt to negate the reality of many oldest old people who require assistance. Instead, it aims to create a cultural environment that enables oldest old adults to live fully when conditions for their meaningful participation are met. The book aims to contribute to constructing a new cultural imagery for ageing, demonstrating how some oldest old adults manage to fully embrace this part of life, despite the prevalent ageist culture and the limitations imposed by ageing. The book is focused on age discrimination, understood above all as a cultural and societal problem. The issue is not solely how the oldest old people have to change to experience better ageing. The main issue is how society must change in order to fully include the oldest old adults. This book intends to contribute to a cultural revolution by combating ageism and reinventing new meanings for ageing.

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Part I

Some Key Issues on the Fourth Age



1

Introduction: Sense of Purpose, Active Ageing and Age Discrimination

Isabella Paoletti

Fast Increase in the Number of Oldest Old People

A crucial aspect of the ageing global population is the exponential increase in the oldest old cohort, which includes centenarians (EUROSTAT, 2023a; UN, 2019). In Europe, adults aged 80 and above nearly doubled in number between 2002 and 2022 (EUROSTAT, 2023b). Despite this significant demographic shift, recent literature that focuses on this age group from a non-medical perspective is scarce; as Lloyd et al. (2014, p. 1) assert, the fourth age remains “a poorly understood phenomenon”. Furthermore, there is limited attention given to the implications at a policy level of the growing number of oldest old people worldwide. The impacts on the health system and welfare system are scantily taken into consideration in the present research. To focus on this age group is necessary and urgent, as Key and Culliney (2018, p. 61) point out: “as life

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expectancy increases and the age profile of western nations pushes upwards, the needs of future cohorts of the Oldest Old will become impossible to ignore”. However, what precise age band is referred to with the terms: “fourth age” and “oldest old”?

There is no consensus on the specific age range for terms such as “oldest old adults” and “fourth age” (Kydd et al., 2020). For instance, the American Geriatric Society and the World Health Organization consider individuals aged over 80 years as “oldest old” (Escourrou et al., 2020), whereas in Japan the term is referred to those aged over 90 (Ouchi et al., 2017). In this book, “oldest old adults” refers to the 80-plus age group.¹ Oldest old people are increasing at a rapid rate: “The share of those aged 80 years or above in the EU’s population is projected to have a two and a half fold increase between 2022 and 2100, from 6.1% to 14.6%” (EUROSTAT, 2023a). The phenomenon of ageing is occurring across all regions of the world. In 2019, Europe, North America and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia had the greatest number of oldest old. However, by 2050, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia are projected to have the majority of oldest old individuals (UN, 2019). Globally, women outnumber men at older ages: “In 2022, women comprised 55.7 per cent of persons aged 65 or older” (UN, 2022, p. 8). The gender gap in longevity becomes more pronounced among individuals aged 80 years or older: “only 63 men for every 100 women” (UN, 2019, p. 2). In Europe, within the oldest old cohort, approximately two-thirds of the oldest old individuals are women (EP, 2021), although this gap is slowly narrowing. The centenarian age group is also experiencing rapid growth: “It is projected that there will be close to half a million centenarians in the EU-27 by 2050” (EUROSTAT, 2020).

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on mortality remains unclear (Aburto et al., 2022), as noted in the UN World Population Prospects 2022: “Empirical evidence of the impact of the pandemic on demographic phenomena remains incomplete due to gaps in the collection of demographic data and to time lags between data collection and dissemination” (UN, 2022, p. 1). However there have been estimates of

¹ The term “elderly” will not be used in this text; in fact according to Amundsen (2022, p. 1): “The term ‘elderly’ is considered particularly problematic by many people who work with older adults”.

excess deaths estimated during the period 2020–2021 (Heun-Johnson & Tysinger, 2022), particularly among older people (Aburto et al., 2022). In 2023, in Europe the share of older people was still increasing, and it was projected to increase, in particular the 85-plus age group (EUROSTAT, 2024). Although the pandemic has certainly heightened mortality rates among the oldest old, it appears that this has not significantly altered the overall trend towards a rapid increase in their number.

The Fourth Age

There is a growing trend to delay when old age is considered to start (Morelock et al., 2017). This postponement shifts negative aspects of ageing, such as loss and decay, to later years, often referred to as the fourth age (Gilleard & Higgs, 2010, 2013; Higgs & Gilleard, 2021), offering only short-term relief for older individuals (Morelock et al., 2017). Escourrou et al. (2022) describe the transition to this dread stage of life as preceded by gradual disengagement and increasing isolation: “when they started living day-by-day, renouncing to any plan in a near future” (Escourrou et al., 2022, p. 1). Reasons for disengagement appear to stem from safety concerns, which may be attributed to some physical problems such as reduced mobility, vision or hearing impairment, or simply the loss of vital impulses. Escourrou et al. (2022, p. 5) point out that: “loss of autonomy for transport and in particular the abandonment of driving seemed a decisive step, as persons were deprived of a freedom of action”. Oldest old adults residing in rural areas and mountain territories may encounter additional challenges due to inadequate transportation options (Cholat & Daconto, 2021; Ness et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2020).

Studies indicate that the oldest old adults tend to downplay their decline (Henchoz et al., 2008; Róin et al., 2021). In their insightful study about self-presentation among this demographic, Róin et al. (2021) describe how the oldest old adults use humour and jokes to describe their limitations; they “play down” their health problems and produce an image of themselves as active and vital individuals. Róin et al. (2021, p. 5) warn: “aging and later life are increasingly culturally constructed in ways that threaten a person’s sense of self”. Morelock et al. (2017, p. 19)

use the terms “misalignment” and “rewriting strategies”, that is, defensive strategies that older people adopt towards the cultural construction of ageing that threaten their sense of self-worth: “We frame age rewriting strategies as forms of creative agency that people use as they orient themselves around notions of the typical life course, making adjustments to bring their age-related narratives and self-concepts closer to what their lived experiences and preferred identities would suggest” (Morelock et al., 2017, p. 20). Nosraty et al. (2015, p. 50) emphasise that for oldest old people being “pain-free” and able to function is more important than being in “good health”. In other words, what is crucial for the oldest old adults is the effective management and adaptation to the limitations brought about by ageing, as highlighted by Róin et al. (2021, p. 2), who define: “successful aging is a state in which a person achieves a sense of wellbeing, high self-assessed quality of life, and a sense of personal fulfilment even in the context of illness and disability”.

Independence and Autonomy at 80-Plus

Maintaining independence is indeed crucial for the oldest old adults (Narushima & Kawabata, 2020), as one of the women interviewed by Saarelainen et al. (2022, p. 1041) highlights: “Yes, I am able to visit the store and take care of all my issues by myself, and I am very happy that I can take care of myself. It’s so important”. However, many oldest old people can still feel independent and autonomous when they have the support of children and grandchildren, helping with shopping, housework and so on (Saarelainen et al., 2022). Adapting tasks or finding new ways of performing them (Kiuru & Valokivi, 2022) is a common strategy for oldest old individuals to maintain their independence. As long as they can live at home, they feel in control of their lives (Saarelainen et al., 2022). As Kiuru and Valokivi (2022, p. 6) noted among their oldest old interviewees: “leaving home seemed to mean the end of things”. If they have freedom to choose, life remains meaningful (Komatsu et al., 2018). Recent research suggests that loneliness is not prevalent among the oldest old individuals, with over half (57%) reporting never feeling lonely, and only a small minority indicating feelings of loneliness (Brittain et al.,

2017). Additionally, studies indicate that self-rated health often differs from objective health conditions (Araújo et al., 2018; Henchoz et al., 2008). In their studies on centenarians, Araújo et al. (2018) observed that the majority of centenarians rated their health as reasonable, good or surprisingly excellent, even in the presence of various diseases and some forms of dependence. As they point out, “The ability to maintain positive self-perceptions and wellbeing despite hardships is considered an important paradox in advanced life” (Araújo et al., 2018, p. 2). Some authors (Moe et al., 2013; Nygren et al., 2005) use the term “inner strength”, referring to the ability to endure difficulties, while maintaining a positive outlook, especially when facing chronic illness. “Senior coolness” is another term used to describe positive outlook on life exhibited by oldest old adults, despite the challenges and ageist attitudes they encounter (Zimmermann & Grebe, 2014). In this respect, Nordmyr et al. (2020) point out that many oldest old adults do not perceive themselves as frail, passive and dependent; on the contrary, they have positive attitudes towards life and actively search for ways to increase their wellbeing.

In Europe, there is evidence of increased longevity and a decrease in more severe forms of disabilities (Rechel et al., 2013; Schietzel et al., 2022). However, less severe forms of disability are more frequent, and older people tend to remain in a reasonably good health for a longer time (Rechel et al., 2013). Autonomy can manifest in various ways, even in the presence of certain disability. The oldest old people can consider themselves autonomous, as asserted by Femia et al. (2001, p. 12): “older adults can function successfully in spite of declining physical health and other age related losses”. Disability can be conceptualized as the result of actual impairments and functional limitations, taking into account individuals’ psychosocial characteristics and their ability to function despite these challenges (Femia et al., 2001). Specifically, forms of support, participation in activities and the maintenance of meaningful relationships can serve as a “protective barrier against disability processes” (Femia et al., 2001, p. 14).

The oldest old people do not generally describe themselves as frail, as noted by Becker (1994, p. 59): “gerontological views of autonomy promote a cultural ideal that does not reflect elders’ perspectives and that the notion of frailty has the potential to stereotype elders, with negative

effects on well being”. Recent studies have emphasized the negative connotations of the term “frailty”. In their scoping review, Durepos et al. (2022, p. 10) observed in various studies that: “Being referred to as frail met with considerable offence, resistance and strong emotional reactions from participants”. It is crucial to emphasise that framing ageing solely in terms of losses is ageist (Boudiny, 2013). There is a necessity to culturally construct new meanings for ageing (Diehl et al., 2020). Morelock et al. (2017, p. 21) underscored that: “Truly overcoming misaligned age norms may require not just rewriting but unwriting age”. In fact, the meaning of ageing significantly hinges on the position assigned to older individuals in society. As Escourrou et al. (2022, p. 6) strongly emphasize: “The feeling of being useless, of becoming a weight, or even a danger, was expressed and could bring the subjects to want to withdraw. Older people considered that today’s society was adapted to the younger generation and not to them”.

Ageism is widespread (Chrisler et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2020; WHO, 2021), and discrimination against older people often goes unnoticed (WHO, 2021). The negative perception of ageing likely presents the most significant barrier to the inclusion and meaningful engagement of the oldest old people, and potentially adversely affecting their health (Chang et al., 2020). Oldest old people are frequently devalued, with limited cognitive and physical ability attributed to them, often relegated to a “roleless role” in society. However, the capacity to find purpose persists throughout life, and offering opportunities for the oldest old adults to maintain their contributing roles, engage in meaningful activities and uphold their social value and sense of relevance is a crucial contribution (Dabelko-Schoeny et al., 2010; Irving et al., 2017; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Sense of Purpose and Wellbeing in Later Life

Recent research has developed into the concept of purpose and meaning in life concerning ageing (Golovchanova et al., 2021; Irving et al., 2017). Many scholars argue that having a sense of purpose becomes particularly crucial for older individuals as a means of promoting resilience and

confronting the limitations associated by ageing (Burrow et al., 2014; Windsor et al., 2015). Individuals should receive support to remain engaged in life despite health challenges and disabilities (Paúl et al., 2017). Maintaining agency, fostering a desire for new plans and projects, engaging in meaningful activities and nurturing a sense of purpose in the later stages of life are vital components of healthy ageing (Hedberg et al., 2010). Certainly, a sense of purpose is viewed as a personal asset (Burrow et al., 2014), a source of resilience (Irving et al., 2017), and is linked to the overall wellbeing (Saarelainen et al., 2022). According to Hedberg et al. (2013, p. 103), it is crucial for oldest old individual “to play an active role” throughout their life to sustain mental and physical health. Indeed, maintaining purpose and intentionality in old age is especially pertinent for ageing well (Irving et al., 2017).

Purpose in life has frequently been linked to positive health outcomes among older adults, including fewer chronic conditions, less disability and delayed mortality (Boyle et al., 2009, 2010; Hedberg et al., 2013; Ibrahim & Dahlan, 2015; Irving et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2022; Musich et al., 2018; Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019; Windsor et al., 2015). In their study, Windsor et al. (2015, p. 984) demonstrate that a greater sense of purpose among older adults corresponds to “higher levels of functioning across a range of aging well measures and greater longevity”. Alzheimer’s disease, stroke and myocardial infarction are less likely to affect older people with a high sense of purpose in life (Fogelman & Canli, 2015; Kim et al., 2014; Ryff, 2014; Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019). As Boyle et al. (2009, p. 6) point out, a sense of purpose “may provide a buffer against negative health outcomes, particularly in old age”. Sense of purpose is described as a source of psychological resilience in old age (Lewis & Hill, 2021). Both a sense of intentionality and goal-directness appear to contribute substantially to ageing well (Lewis & Hill, 2021; Windsor et al., 2015), to the maintenance of independence in old age and even to longevity (Kim et al., 2014). For older people to play an active role until the end of their life helps them maintain their physical and mental health (Ryff, 2014). Therefore, in the care of very old people, it is essential to help them maintain and recuperate their sense purpose in life (Hedberg et al., 2013). As Irving et al. (2017, p. 430) point out, “Fostering sense of purpose for older adults is an important, but underappreciated aim,

particularly within the health and aged care contexts”. Boeder et al. (2020) highlight the significance of engagement among the oldest old residing in assisted living facilities. They observe that residents who are able to participate in meaningful activities tend to appreciate their experiences, while those who cannot, due to health or mobility challenges, often feel frustrated. However, what is precisely meant by sense of purpose?

Definition of Sense of Purpose and Meaning in Life

Researchers describe maintaining purpose in life among very old people as the ability to continue with life, make new plans and look forward to developing new projects (Hedberg et al., 2013). Purpose in life is conceptualized as having a sense of direction and intentionality, and a feeling that there is meaning in present and past life experiences, holding beliefs that gives life purpose, and having aims and objectives for living (Irving et al., 2017; Musich et al., 2018; Windsor et al., 2015). Windsor et al. (2015) underline that sense of purpose is connected to goal attainment and linked to abilities such as adaptability to developmental challenges (Windsor et al., 2015, p. 976). This is, as Burrow et al. (2014, p. 3) specify, “a higher-order source of resilience to life challenges”. In fact, central to a notion of sense of purpose are the abilities to set meaningful goals for oneself and to organize the necessary steps to achieve those goals (Windsor et al., 2015). Mak’s (2018, p. 807) recent research results suggest that “purpose is inherently experienced through activity and often driven by social connection”. Having hobbies and making future plans helps in maintaining a sense of purpose (Hedberg et al., 2013). For Irving et al. (2017, p. 404), sense of purpose can have various sources: “Purpose can be derived from relationships, societal, work or familial roles, pursuit of personal goals, maintaining independence, generativity, community engagement, or participation in activities that are individually meaningful and relevant”. Boeder et al. (2020, p. 1197) use the term “purposeful engagement”, referring to activities that genuinely involve the oldest old residents of assisted living facilities and contribute substantially to their wellbeing. Hedberg et al. (2013) describe differences between very old

men and women in experiencing purpose in life. In interviews, men seemed to link sense of purpose with life in the past or to make plans in the present, while women instead seemed to focus more on daily activities and relationships (Hedberg et al., 2013).

Meaning in life is a similar concept to the sense of purpose present in the literature. As Steptoe and Fancourt (2019, p. 1211) explain, “Meaning of life is a complex concept involving notions of life being comprehensible and coherent, having purpose and direction, as well as having significance and being worth living”. Saarelainen et al. (2022) noticed the centrality of relationality to experience meaning in life. Derkx et al. (2020) point out the necessity of reformulating the concept of meaning in life based on the variety of formulations proposed by older people confronted with limitations and losses brought about by ageing.

Enhancing Sense of Purpose

Recent longitudinal studies (Windsor et al., 2015) highlight a statistically significant decrease in purpose among older people. However, it is also possible to enhance the sense of purpose by involving older people in goal-directed activities. As Irving et al. (2017, p. 430) point out: “Even small behavioural strategies and modifications may affect an increased sense of intentionality, usefulness, and relevance for older adults”. For example, Mak (2011) noticed a difference among older people involved in drawing activities: those involved in creating cards for friends and relatives experienced a greater sense of purpose than those who were just drawing. It appears that a sense of purpose can be cultivated and developed. In other words, a sense of purpose can be created and increased by stimulating social participation in the oldest old. It is a virtuous circle: a greater sense of purpose stimulates social participation, and social participation and an active life produce a sense of purpose (Steptoe & Fancourt, 2019). If old age brings related losses, in terms of health, roles, disappearance of family members and friends and so on, it is also possible to create new roles and plans in later life (Windsor et al., 2015). Retirement appears to be a crucial turning point in life. By developing new hobbies and meaningfully socially engaging activities, joining volunteering

programmes could help older adults in this transition, increasing their sense of purpose in a delicate phase (Kim et al., 2014). However, the promotion of engagement, involvement and active ageing of oldest old adults may conceal a form of ageism. It may discriminate against those oldest old people who are not ageing well, who are not motivated to participate, to be involved and to remain active.

Criticism of Active Ageing

The literature documenting the participation of oldest old people in various activities is scarce. The active ageing paradigm has mainly focused on involving the young old (Boudiny, 2013; Ranzijn, 2010). The third age is often represented as a perpetuation of midlife in mainstream gerontology (Naughton et al., 2021). Criticism is directed towards the notion of active ageing and similar, subtly divergent notions, such as successful ageing, healthy ageing and productive ageing (Laliberte Rudman, 2006; Lamb, 2017; Paoletti, 2015; Ranzijn, 2010; Rozanova, 2010; van Dyk, 2014). Reductions in care expenses were seen as the basis of the active policy framework (Laliberte Rudman, 2006) and new commercial opportunities linked to the silver economy (Rozanova, 2010). Critical gerontologists problematize the pressure to conform to the active ageing paradigm, as noted by Laliberte Rudman (2006). Amundsen (2022) criticizes the successful ageing model for imposing unrealistic standards of ageing on older adults. In addition, the ethnocentric aspects of the notion of successful ageing were highlighted in critical gerontology (Liang & Luo, 2012). The model of successful ageing ignores the great diversity among the oldest old people and disregards differences in relation to gender, racial/ethnic membership and so on (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Liang & Luo, 2012). In Western cultures, actions and social participation are certainly central values, but not as much in other cultures where spiritual activities may hold more value. Lamb (2017) describes successful ageing as a modern obsession.

In Western countries, prevailing narratives often burden older people with moral obligations to stay fit and strong and age successfully, in order to avoid impending weakness and disabilities (Lamb, 2017). Above all,

the responsibility for escaping the “misery” of ageing becomes predominantly an individual duty, a personal responsibility (Liang & Luo, 2012; van Dyk, 2014). As Enßle and Helbrecht (2021, p. 2399) note: “Striving to delay ageing—or failing to do so—has become a self-responsibility that depends on strength of character and proper attention to youthful appearance”. Such notions risk being ageist (Hopf et al., 2021), discriminating against those older people “who do not fit into the category of independent and active people” (Okun & Ayalon, 2022, p. 1), who are not ageing well, those who do not show wiliness or ability to participate, who do not want to be engaged and motivated and who do not display adaptability and resilience. As van Dyk (2014) indicates, “In times of plasticity, activation and individualization, retirees who are not ageing successfully are the ‘failed ones’, those who have not worked hard enough on themselves”. Critical gerontologists argue that the general description of population ageing as a problem is based on a very negative idea of elderliness (van Dyk, 2014). Notions such as “successful ageing” and similar ones work to further devaluing ageing, in fact reinforcing ageism, as van Dyk (2014, p. 97) indicates: “Critical Gerontologists consider the concept of active ageing itself as ageist and oppressive”. In particular, freeing active agers from ageism implies the confinement and exclusion of frail and dependent older people (Okun & Ayalon, 2022).

Active ageing has been mainly associated with the third age, while dependency and frailty are often relegated to the fourth age (Higgs & Gilleard, 2015; Higgs & Gilleard, 2021). Critical gerontologists problematize the construction of older people as an out-group (Amundsen, 2022; Naughton et al., 2021). Both constructs, othering “by glorification” in relation to the third agers and othering “by abjection” towards the fourth agers, are criticized (Naughton et al., 2021). In particular, they object to the linearity of the progression from third to fourth age, as Naughton et al. (2021, p. 8) point out: “we argue against dichotomous categories and for something altogether more human, messy, ambiguous, and inclusive of all our foibles, where age and aging are seen as neither all good nor all bad”. In particular, Naughton et al. (2021, p. 9) underline that aspects such as dependency and frailty should not be interpreted as necessarily negative; there may be positive aspects: “renewed interconnectedness through interdependence; gratitude and appreciation through

vulnerability; joyful surrender through physical limitation; and intensive contemplation through solitude”.

To argue against the notion of active ageing, critical gerontologists often highlight the specificity of old age in relation to other stages of life. Resemblances with the disengagement paradigm are noticeable (van Dyk, 2014). Distrusting sameness and focusing on the authenticity of ageing, they insist that older people should be allowed to be “what they truly are” (van Dyk, 2014). However, what is authentic ageing? Moody and Sasser (2012, p. 55), for example, describe ageing as “an underlying time-dependent biological process that, although not itself a disease, involves functional loss and susceptibility to disease and death”. Research documents the plasticity of the functioning within biological limits in the ageing process (Fernandez-Ballesteros et al., 2009); that is, delaying decline as well as recuperating abilities when lost due to accidents or illness are possible. Critical gerontologists, problematizing anti-ageing practices and considering them “unnatural”, tend to homogenize ageing, forgetting that the “reality” of ageing is multifaceted. Above all, they appear to ignore that defining the category “old age” is problematic (van Dyk, 2014). Age categories can be seen as socially constructed and ongoingly interactionally negotiated (Sacks, 1992).

Recently, Amundsen (2022, p. 3) criticized the biomedical model of ageing and proposes shifting the focus to “how older adults can purposefully and resiliently navigate their lives within changing physical, social and cognitive contexts”. Naughton et al. (2021) underline the importance for both researchers and practitioners to pay critical attention to language and representation. The heterogeneity of older people’s voices should be highlighted, deconstructing the binaries of “glorification” and “abjection”. This book intends to describe ways in which oldest old people navigate their lives, showing their actual involvement in various activities. The studies in this collection point out the contradictions of old age, allowing for the vulnerability of oldest old people but also highlighting their heterogeneity and their ability to overcome difficulties. Considering the criticism of active ageing and acknowledging the right of frail, dependent older people to support and care, there is no plausible reason for both frail and fit oldest old people to stop striving to age in good health and to be engaged in deeply meaningful activities, that is, activities