

Positive Ageing as Lived Experience: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Well Being and Ageing Perceptions among Older Adults in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This hermeneutic phenomenological study examines how older adults in Hong Kong experience and interprets positive ageing, with a focus on the subjective processes through which wellbeing is cultivated in later life. As global populations age, qualitative, firstperson accounts are essential for understanding ageing beyond biomedical or declineoriented frameworks. Two selfidentified positive agers participated in semistructured Zoom interviews, offering rich descriptions of their lived experiences. Analysis revealed three interrelated themes: (1) ageing as a liberating and reflective life phase that enables renewed selfunderstanding; (2) wellbeing as actively sustained through sensory, embodied practices-such as gardening-and through meaningful social relationships; and (3) resilience as grounded in emotional endurance, community belonging, and a sense of legacy. Participants' narratives, including P1's depiction of retirement as "lightness" and P2's emphasis on pride and contribution, challenge deficitbased assumptions and highlight autonomy, purpose, and fulfilment in later life. Although limited by a small sample, the study underscores the importance of personal agency, cultural values, and social engagement in shaping positive ageing. The findings support personcentred approaches and ageinclusive policies, offering insights for psychological practice and communitybased interventions aimed at enhancing older adults' wellbeing.

Keywords: *Positive Ageing; Lived Experience; Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study; Well Being; Ageing Perceptions; Older Adults*

Introduction

Global demographic shifts have brought unprecedented attention to the experiences of older adults. The World Health Organization [1] estimates that by 2050, the population aged 60 and above will reach 2.1 billion, intensifying the need to understand not only longevity but also the quality of later life. Within this context, positive ageing has emerged as a central concept in gerontology and psychology. Often described as successful, active, or healthy ageing, positive ageing refers to the capacity to maintain physical, cognitive, social, and emotional wellbeing in later life [2]. This perspective challenges declineoriented narratives by emphasising growth, fulfilment, and resilience as meaningful possibilities in older adulthood [3].

Despite this conceptual shift, much of the existing literature remains dominated by biomedical and functional models that prioritise measurable indicators such as physical health, mobility, and social participation [4]. While valuable, these approaches often overlook the subjective, experiential dimensions of ageing-how older adults interpret their lives, construct meaning, and negotiate identity in the context of ageing [5]. Ageing is not solely a biological process; it is a lived, temporal, and culturally embedded experience shaped by personal histories, values, and social worlds. Yet these experiential layers remain underexplored, particularly in quantitative research that privileges standardised metrics over narrative depth.

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Positive ageing is also closely aligned with psychological theories of wellbeing. Hedonic models emphasise pleasure and positive affect, whereas eudaimonic models highlight meaning, purpose, and selfrealisation [6]. Both frameworks suggest that older adults can flourish when they maintain meaningful relationships, engage in purposeful activities, and cultivate a coherent sense of self. However, these theories rarely capture how such experiences are lived and felt in everyday contexts. Understanding positive ageing therefore requires attending to the firstperson accounts of older adults themselves.

The literature on positive ageing remains limited in two important ways. First, it often prioritises objective indicators over subjective meaningmaking, neglecting psychological dimensions such as autonomy, pride, and resilience. Second, much of the research is Westerncentric, offering limited insight into ageing in collectivistic societies such as Hong Kong [7]. Cultural values, intergenerational expectations, and social norms shape how ageing is understood and experienced, making it essential to explore positive ageing within specific sociocultural contexts.

Phenomenology offers a powerful methodological approach for addressing these gaps. Rather than generalising across populations, phenomenology seeks to illuminate the essence of a phenomenon through detailed accounts of lived experience [8]. Hermeneutic phenomenology, in particular, emphasises interpretation, acknowledging that meaning emerges through the interplay between participants' narratives and the researcher's reflective engagement [9]. This approach is well suited to exploring how older adults experience joy, resilience, identity, and purpose in later life-dimensions that are often invisible in quantitative studies.

The present study aims to explore the lived experience of positive ageing among older adults in Hong Kong. Hong Kong provides a unique cultural context, blending collectivistic values such as filial piety with the pressures of a fastpaced, urban environment. These dynamics shape how older adults negotiate independence, social roles, and wellbeing. By focusing on the narratives of Englishspeaking adults aged 65 and above who selfidentify as positive agers, this study seeks to illuminate the subjective, emotional, and existential dimensions of ageing that are often overlooked.

Through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, this research aims to deepen understanding of how older adults interpret their ageing journeys, how they sustain wellbeing, and how cultural and social contexts shape their experiences. The findings have implications not only for psychological practice but also for community programming and policy development, contributing to a more nuanced and personcentred understanding of ageing.

Literature Review

Theoretical perspectives on positive ageing

Positive ageing is commonly conceptualised through psychological theories of wellbeing, particularly the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic models. Hedonic wellbeing emphasises pleasure, happiness, and positive affect, whereas eudaimonic wellbeing focuses on meaning, authenticity, and selfrealisation. Killen and Macaskill [6] demonstrated that both frameworks can accommodate a wide range of positive life events in older adulthood, highlighting domains such as life attitude, selfawareness, and reflective functioning as central to laterlife wellness. Their findings suggest that existing models may require expansion to fully capture the nuanced narratives of older adults, particularly those who actively cultivate wellbeing.

BarTur [10] similarly conceptualised ageing as a period of continued physical, cognitive, and social development. Interventions such as the Mental Fitness Programme for Positive Ageing illustrate how hedonic and eudaimonic principles can be operationalised to enhance confidence, purpose, and psychological resilience. Together, these studies underscore the value of integrating both pleasurebased and meaningbased dimensions when examining positive ageing.

Social interactions and relational wellbeing

Social relationships play a pivotal role in shaping psychological wellbeing in later life. Older adults consistently report that meaningful connections with family, friends, and community groups contribute to a sense of belonging and emotional stability [6]. BarTur [10] further emphasised the importance of groupbased activities in reducing loneliness and enhancing social support, particularly for individuals with limited networks.

Nakamura, *et al.* [7] found that perceived satisfaction with ageing is strongly associated with social integration. Their findings indicate that positive attitudes toward ageing correlate with better selfrated health, reduced loneliness, and enhanced psychological wellbeing. These results highlight the relational foundations of positive ageing and suggest that opportunities for social engagement-whether through community programmes or informal networks-are essential for sustaining wellbeing.

Psychological dimensions of wellbeing

Psychological factors such as autonomy, selfacceptance, and meaningmaking are central to how individuals experience ageing. From a postmodern perspective, these dimensions reflect the broader cultural emphasis on independence and selfrealisation. Nakamura, *et al.* [7] demonstrated that positive attitudes toward ageing predict increased physical activity, longer lifespan, and reduced mortality, underscoring the importance of psychological orientation in shaping health outcomes.

Psychotherapeutic frameworks similarly highlight the role of mindfulness, gratitude, and reflective practice in supporting wellbeing. Killen and Macaskill [6] noted that older adults often use reflective strategies to affirm their life choices and cope with agerelated challenges. These findings suggest that psychological interventions promoting selfreflection and emotional regulation may be particularly beneficial for older adults.

Cognitive and physical engagement

Cognitive and physical activities are widely recognised as protective factors in healthy ageing. Cognitive engagement-such as memory training, problemsolving tasks, and skill acquisition-has been shown to slow cognitive decline and enhance mental acuity [11]. These activities also foster a sense of accomplishment and purpose, contributing to emotional wellbeing.

Physical activity similarly supports both physical and psychological health. BarTur [10] reported that regular exercise reduces stress, increases energy, and promotes embodied awareness. Activities such as walking, gardening, or participating in group classes provide opportunities for sensory engagement and social interaction. Killen and Macaskill [6] found that older adults who interact with natural environments-through walking or observing nature-report enhanced wellbeing, suggesting that environmental connectedness plays a meaningful role in positive ageing.

Methodological considerations in positive ageing research

Methodological choices significantly shape the insights gained in positive ageing research. Phenomenological approaches, such as those used by Killen and Macaskill [6], offer rich, indepth accounts of how older adults perceive and construct wellbeing. Diary methods, interviews, and narrative techniques allow researchers to capture the emotional and existential dimensions of ageing that are often overlooked in quantitative studies.

Longitudinal research, such as that conducted by Nakamura, *et al.* [7], provides valuable insights into how attitudes toward ageing evolve over time and how these attitudes influence longterm health outcomes. However, much of the existing literature remains Westerncentric, limiting its applicability to culturally diverse contexts. There is a pressing need for research that examines positive ageing within nonWestern societies, where cultural norms, family structures, and social expectations differ significantly.

Methodology

Design

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how older adults experience and interpret positive ageing. Phenomenology is well suited to uncovering the meanings individuals ascribe to their lived experiences, while the hermeneutic orientation emphasises interpretation and coconstruction of meaning between researcher and participant [9]. This approach enabled a nuanced exploration of the emotional, sensory, and existential dimensions of positive ageing, aligning with the study's aim to illuminate subjective experience rather than generate generalisable claims.

A key feature of hermeneutic phenomenology is the researcher's commitment to reflexivity and the intentional suspension of prior assumptions—a process rooted in the phenomenological concept of *Epoche*. In this study, I engaged in systematic bracketing to set aside, as far as possible, my preexisting beliefs, theoretical perspectives, and personal experiences related to ageing. This was achieved through the maintenance of a reflexive journal throughout the research process, in which I documented my evolving thoughts, emotional responses, and interpretive inclinations. Prior to data collection, I wrote a detailed account of my own assumptions about positive ageing—including expectations about resilience, social connectedness, and cultural values—and revisited these notes regularly during analysis. This practice did not aim to eliminate subjectivity, which is neither possible nor desirable in hermeneutic inquiry, but rather to cultivate an attitude of openness and receptivity to participants' unique lived experiences. By acknowledging and holding my preconceptions in awareness, I sought to remain attentive to the participants' voices and to allow their narratives to guide the interpretive process.

Participants and recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich, experiential accounts of positive ageing. Two English-speaking adults aged 65 and above, residing in Hong Kong and self-identifying as positive agers, participated in the study. A pilot interview was conducted to refine the interview schedule and deepen phenomenological focus.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be:

- Aged 65 or older.
- Able to communicate in English.
- Willing to reflect on their experiences of ageing.
- Self-reporting a generally positive orientation toward ageing.
- Engaged in regular physical activity, consistent with recruitment from fitness clubs.
- Possessing basic proficiency in using online platforms, consistent with recruitment through social media forums.

Individuals experiencing significant physical or psychological distress were excluded to ensure the study remained aligned with its focus on positive ageing.

Participants were recruited through flyers distributed in health clubs and through posts on social media platforms. This strategy facilitated access to a diverse group of older adults with varying cultural backgrounds. The inclusion of physical activity engagement and social media proficiency as selection criteria was informed by the recruitment context—participants were drawn from fitness clubs and online forums, suggesting that these characteristics were relevant to their lived experiences and capacity to engage meaningfully with the research process.

Data collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted via Zoom, using audio-only format to support participant comfort and anonymity. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and followed an open-ended schedule designed to elicit rich descriptions of lived experience (Appendix

D). Questions such as “How do you define positive ageing?” and “What do you do for your wellbeing?” encouraged participants to reflect on their daily practices, emotional experiences, and personal interpretations of ageing.

The pilot interview informed refinements to the schedule, ensuring greater phenomenological depth. All interviews were audiorecorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from The Open University’s ethics committee. Participants received an information sheet and consent form via email and provided written and verbal consent. Additional verbal consent was obtained at the start of each interview.

To protect confidentiality, transcripts were anonymised and any identifying information removed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point before data analysis. Given the study’s focus on positive ageing, the interview schedule was designed to promote emotional safety; if participants raised distressing topics, the conversation was gently redirected in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Supporting documents, including consent forms and data management plans, are provided in appendices A-E.

Analysis

Data were analysed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which emphasises interpretive engagement with participants’ narratives. The process unfolded in several iterative stages, consistent with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology.

First, I engaged in repeated readings of the verbatim transcripts to gain an immersive and holistic understanding of each participant’s account. This involved reading each transcript multiple times over several weeks, allowing the narratives to resonate and reveal their inherent meanings. During this phase, I paid close attention to the participants’ use of language, metaphors, and emotional expressions, recognising these as windows into their lived experiences.

Second, I identified meaning units-significant statements, phrases, or passages that captured essential aspects of the participants’ experiences of positive ageing. These meaning units were not predetermined but emerged organically from the data through close, reflective engagement with the text. For example, P1’s description of “lightness” and P2’s reference to “quiet pride” were identified as particularly salient meaning units that pointed toward broader existential themes.

Third, I interpreted and clustered these meaning units into thematic structures that reflected shared patterns of experience across participants. This process involved moving back and forth between the parts (individual meaning units) and the whole (the complete narrative) in a hermeneutic circle, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the participants’ accounts while also attending to deeper existential and phenomenological meanings. To enhance interpretive depth, I drew upon the lifeworld existentials-temporality, spatiality, embodiment, sociality, and identity-as sensitising concepts, allowing these dimensions to illuminate the participants’ narratives without imposing a rigid theoretical framework.

Fourth, throughout the analysis, I maintained reflexive notes to document my interpretive decisions, emotional responses, and evolving understanding of the data. These notes served as an ongoing record of the hermeneutic process, enabling me to track how my assumptions and perspectives influenced the analysis and to remain accountable to the participants’ lived realities.

Three themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Ageing as a coping and meaningmaking process.
2. Wellbeing as embodied and relational practice.
3. Resilience as emotional endurance and community support.

These themes illuminate how positive ageing is lived as a subjective, embodied, and relational experience. They reflect the participants' efforts to cultivate wellbeing, maintain purpose, and navigate ageing with agency and emotional depth. The findings highlight the interpretive, meaningladen nature of positive ageing and underscore the value of phenomenology in capturing its complexity.

Findings

Theme 1: Perceptions of ageing as reflection, freedom, and legacy

This theme captures how participants reinterpreted ageing as a period of reflection, authenticity, and personal growth, countering dominant narratives of decline. For Participant 1 (P1), a 68yearold retired teacher, retirement marked a profound shift in selfunderstanding. She described a moment of clarity during an afternoon of painting: "It felt light, like a weight had lifted off my shoulders... It's like I've earned the right to just be myself after all those years". This sense of "lightness" emerged from the release of longstanding responsibilities-teaching, caregiving, and household labour. Her narrative reflects a movement toward authentic selfhood, a key lifeworld dimension, as she reclaimed time, agency, and identity.

P1 acknowledged earlier fears of ageing-wrinkles, aches, and the cultural script of decline-but reframed these bodily changes as markers of experience rather than loss: "I don't feel old in a bad way; I feel seasoned, like a good wine". This metaphor signals a shift from deficit to value, positioning ageing as maturation rather than deterioration.

Participant 2 (P2), a 72yearold retired clerk, described ageing as a period of reflective pride: "It's about looking back and seeing all I've done-it's a quiet pride". The birth of a grandchild crystallised this sense of legacy: "I thought, 'I've done something good in this world.'" His narrative is deeply embedded in Hong Kong's cultural emphasis on intergenerational continuity and respect for elders. P2's reflections highlight temporality (life review), sociality (family lineage), and identity (legacy and contribution).

Both participants resisted stereotypes of frailty and decline. P2 stated, "You see these pictures of old people as weak or lonely, but that's not me... I'm still living, still laughing". Their accounts reveal ageing as an embodied, emotionally rich experience shaped by autonomy, pride, and cultural meaning.

Theme 2: Wellbeing practices as sensory, relational, and embodied engagement

This theme illustrates how participants sustained wellbeing through daily practices that engaged the senses, fostered connection, and grounded them in the present moment.

For P1, gardening was central: "Gardening's my big one. It brings me peace-it's just me and the plants, and I feel alive touching the soil". Gardening provided a slow, rhythmic, embodied engagement with nature. Her description-sun warmth, tactile soil, blooming flowers-reflects spatiality and embodiment, key phenomenological lifeworld dimensions. These sensory experiences counteracted physical fatigue and anchored her in moments of calm and meaning.

P2's wellbeing was rooted in weekly tea gatherings with lifelong friends: "We sit there, sipping tea, talking about everything and nothing... sometimes we laugh so hard I forget I'm 72!" These rituals, grounded in Hong Kong's communal dining traditions, provided

emotional nourishment and continuity. P2's recollection-"I've lived well, and I've got people who know me"-highlights the importance of relational belonging and shared history.

Both participants framed wellbeing not as an abstract construct but as a lived, sensory, relational process. Their practices-gardening and tea gatherings-demonstrate how ordinary routines can sustain emotional vitality and counteract stereotypes of isolation.

Theme 3: Resilience and coping as emotional endurance and relational strength

This theme captures how participants navigated physical and emotional challenges through humour, determination, and community support.

P1 described resilience as an active stance: "It's a victory every time I do it-I feel stronger with every hurdle". Despite knee pain and a past fall, she reframed limitations as opportunities for perseverance: "I laugh at myself-'Come on, old girl, keep going!'" Humour and selftalk served as coping mechanisms that transformed vulnerability into agency.

P2's resilience was relationally grounded. After his wife's passing, he described grief as "the big one-really hard," yet he found strength in his daughter's support: "I feel her love keeps me going". He also relied on a seniors' group: "It's a lifeline-keeps me from sinking". His resilience emerged from sociality, emotional connection, and continuity of care.

Both participants reframed adversity-physical for P1, emotional for P2-through meaningmaking, humour, and community. Their narratives illustrate resilience as a dynamic, relational, and embodied process rather than a fixed trait.

Discussion

This study explored how older adults in Hong Kong perceive and experience positive ageing. The findings reveal positive ageing as a deeply subjective, meaningladen phenomenon shaped by reflection, embodied practices, and relational resilience. Rather than viewing ageing as decline, participants framed it as a period of authenticity, pride, and purposeful engagement.

Integration with psychological and developmental theories

The findings align with and extend psychological theories of ageing. Erikson's stage of integrity versus despair [12] is evident in P1's "lightness" and P2's "quiet pride," both of which reflect acceptance, coherence, and life review. McAdams' [13] narrative identity theory is also supported: participants constructed ageing through stories of liberation, legacy, and relational continuity. These narratives illustrate how meaningmaking fosters wellbeing and strengthens positive age identity.

The findings challenge quantitative models that prioritise objective indicators such as physical health or activity levels [14]. Instead, they highlight the emotional, existential, and relational dimensions of ageing-dimensions that are often invisible in biomedical frameworks.

Phenomenological insights: Embodiment, temporality, and sociality

MerleauPonty's philosophy of embodiment [15] is reflected in participants' descriptions of gardening, walking, and sensory engagement. Ageing was experienced through the body-not as decline but as a site of vitality, connection, and meaning. Temporality was evident in life review and legacy, while sociality shaped resilience and belonging.

These findings contribute to phenomenological understandings of ageing by illustrating how older adults actively reinterpret bodily changes, relationships, and life transitions.

Implications for practice and policy

The study suggests several implications:

- Psychological practice should prioritise subjective wellbeing, meaningmaking, and embodied engagement rather than deficitbased models.
- Community programmes-such as gardening groups, tea gatherings, or intergenerational workshops-can support emotional and social wellbeing.
- Policy initiatives should amplify older adults' voices, ensuring agefriendly environments that honour emotional, relational, and cultural needs [16,17].

These insights are particularly relevant in Hong Kong, where collectivistic values and rapid urbanisation intersect to shape ageing experiences.

Limitations and Reflexivity

The study's small sample limits the diversity of perspectives. Selfidentified "positive agers" may present more favourable experiences, and Englishspeaking participants may not reflect the broader population. Cultural hybridity in Hong Kong also limits generalisability.

Reflexively, my own experiences with ageing relatives shaped my interpretive lens. Familiarity with naturebased wellbeing, for example, deepened my resonance with P1's gardening narrative. While bracketing was attempted through reflexive journaling and systematic selfexamination, complete neutrality is impossible in hermeneutic phenomenology; instead, meaning emerged through dialogue between participant and researcher. The process of Epoche was approached as an ongoing, iterative practice rather than a onetime achievement, allowing me to remain attentive to the participants' lived realities while acknowledging the inescapable influence of my own subjectivity.

Future Research

Future studies could:

- Include participants with diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.
- Explore less positive or mixed experiences of ageing.
- Use longitudinal designs to examine evolving perceptions.
- Integrate mixed methods to test subjective insights quantitatively.

Such approaches would broaden understanding while preserving experiential richness.

Conclusion

This study illuminates positive ageing as a vibrant, relational, and embodied journey. Participants actively resisted decline narratives through autonomy, sensory engagement, humour, and community. As P1 expressed, "It's a victory every time I do it-I feel stronger with every hurdle". Their stories challenge stereotypes and highlight ageing as a dynamic, purposeful, and emotionally rich experience. By centring older adults' voices, this research advocates for psychological and policy approaches that honour the lived realities of ageing and promote environments where older adults can flourish.

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