

Proceeding Paper

How Is Purpose in Life Experienced When the Road Ahead Is Shorter than the Road Behind? A Qualitative Study with Older Adults in Spain [†]

Alejandra Chulian ¹, Carlos García-Prado ², Sara Escriche-Martinez ²  and Sonsoles Valdivia-Salas ^{2,*} 

¹ Department of Psychology and Health Science, Open University of Madrid, 28400 Madrid, Spain; mariaalejandra.chulian@udima.es

² Department of Psychology and Sociology, University of Zaragoza, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain; 843931@unizar.es (C.G.-P.); sescriche@unizar.es (S.E.-M.)

* Correspondence: sonsoval@unizar.es

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Abstract

Purpose in life is a central component of healthy ageing and psychological well-being, yet its meaning in later life has often been operationalised through standardized measures rather than being grounded in older adults' lived experience. This qualitative study explores how older adults living in the community in Spain interpret their life purpose during the transitions of old age. Ten adults aged 65 years and older from Aragón and Andalucía participated in semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 min. Data were analyzed using reflective thematic analysis on ageing supported by MAXQDA, supplemented with questions related to internalized ageism, psychological inflexibility, and quality of life to enrich the interpretive depth. Four themes were identified: (1) purpose as biographical continuity; (2) purpose as a dynamic and adaptive process; (3) legacy as a central axis towards meaning; and (4) the interplay between internal strengths and external conditions. Participants constructed purpose as rooted in identity, values, and life narratives rather than in distal goal attainment. Purpose was maintained through adaptive processes—including resilience, psychological flexibility, and meaning-centered coping—while internalized ageism and personal barriers emerged as life limitations. These findings suggest that purpose in later life is not diminished, but rather is reconfigured through processes of adaptation, value alignment, and social contribution. The study highlights the need for person-centred and process-based approaches that promote psychological flexibility and challenge deficit-based and ageist views of ageing.

Keywords: healthy ageing; purpose in life; qualitative research; older adults; ageism; psychological flexibility; values; legacy



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1. Introduction

Population ageing represents one of the most significant demographic transformations of the 21st century, reshaping health systems, social structures, and research priorities. In this context, healthy ageing has become established as a framework, defined as the process of developing and maintaining functional capacity that enables well-being in old age [1]. This perspective emphasizes not only the absence of disease, but also autonomy, participation, and the ability to live in accordance with personal values.

Within this multidimensional framework, purpose in life has been identified as a key psychological resource. Purpose refers to a sense of direction and meaning that organizes behaviour and provides coherence across the lifespan [2,3]. Empirical research has consistently linked purpose to lower mortality risk, better physical health, and higher psychological well-being in older adults [4,5]. It is also a central element of person-centred care, as it aligns interventions with individuals' values, preferences, and life narratives [6].

Despite this growing evidence and scientific interest, much of the literature has conceptualized purpose through standardized measures, focusing on its intensity rather than its meaning. This approach may overlook how older adults themselves experience and construct purpose in everyday life, particularly in the context of ageing-related transitions such as retirement, bereavement, or health changes. From a lifespan perspective, these transitions require ongoing processes of adaptation and meaning-making [7].

Contemporary models of ageing provide a useful framework for understanding these processes. The Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model [8], conceptualizes ageing as a dynamic interplay between gains and losses, in which individuals select meaningful goals, optimize available resources, and compensate for limitations. This adaptive process suggests that purpose is not static but continuously reorganised across the life course.

At the same time, the contextual model in psychology highlights the role of psychological flexibility, defined as the ability to remain connected to the present moment while acting in accordance with personal values [9]. Psychological flexibility has been identified as a key mechanism underlying well-being in older adults, facilitating adaptation to life stressors and supporting value-based action. Interventions based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) have demonstrated effectiveness in improving quality of life and reducing distress by enhancing flexibility and value alignment.

Another critical factor shaping purpose in later life is ageism. Age-based stereotypes and discrimination can be internalized, influencing older adults' self-perceptions, expectations, and behaviour [10]. Internalized ageism has been associated with poorer health outcomes, reduced engagement, and diminished well-being [11,12]. Emerging research suggests that interventions targeting psychological flexibility and self-perceptions of ageing may mitigate these effects, highlighting the importance of addressing ageism as a contextual and modifiable factor [13,14].

Furthermore, personal values play a fundamental role in the processes of constructing meaning in life. Values guide behavior and shape attitudes toward ageing and older people, influencing how people interpret their experiences and define what is meaningful [15]. This suggests that purpose is not only an individual construct but also has a significant social and cultural influence.

Finally, recent research emphasizes the importance of personal strengths—such as resilience, gratitude, and adaptive coping—in sustaining well-being in later life, even in adverse contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic [16]. These findings support a strengths-based perspective that challenges deficit-oriented views of ageing.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that purpose in old age is a dynamic and context-dependent construct, shaped by biography, values, psychological processes, and social conditions. However, qualitative research is still needed to explore, through open and personalized interviews, how older adults experience and articulate purpose in their daily lives.

In line with the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030), this study aims to explore how purpose in life is constructed, sustained, and renegotiated among older adults in Spain.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Ten adults aged 65 and over living in the community participated. Participants were recruited in Aragon (with the collaboration of the Zaragoza City Council’s senior citizens department and the Aragonese Health System) and Andalusia (Spain) to reflect diverse life trajectories and active ageing profiles. Participants were recruited at a public healthcare center where they attended an active ageing course. Following the presentation of the study and the application of the inclusion criteria (none or mild cognitive impairment; age over 65 years; ability to speak and understand Spanish), 10 older adults (9 women and 1 man), aged between 71 and 86 years, were selected to participate. All participants provided written informed consent prior to the start of their participation.

Participation was voluntary, and no financial or other compensation was provided.

2.2. Measures

Semi-structured interviews (60–90 min) explored significant achievements, difficulties encountered throughout life, coping strategies, personal strengths, current barriers to a significant life, and legacy. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonymised.

Participants also completed brief measures of internalized ageism, resilience, psychological inflexibility, and quality of life to enrich interpretation.

Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained.

2.3. Procedure

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 24 [17]. A hybrid approach combined a priori and inductive coding to explore lived experience and meaning-making processes in later life.

3. Results

Through interviews, participants described diverse life trajectories marked by caregiving responsibilities, work-related transitions, migration, widowhood, chronic illness, and family caregiving. Despite these experiences, all participants articulated ongoing sources of meaning and purpose in later life.

The thematic analysis conducted so far identified six interrelated themes concerning purpose in later adulthood: (1) purpose as biographical continuity, (2) family as the primary source of purpose, (3) generativity and legacy, (4) adaptation to adversity, (5) caregiving and responsibility, and (6) positive ageing and resistance to ageist stereotypes (Table 1). These themes were consistently evident across participants, despite substantial variation in life trajectories, health status, and social circumstances.

Table 1. Themes, descriptions and illustrative quotations.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotations
Purpose as biographical continuity	Participants understood purpose as emerging from their life trajectories and from the continuity between past experiences, present identity, and future aspirations. Life challenges were integrated into a coherent narrative rather than viewed as disruptions.	“Those were very, very hard years (...) but we were very happy during those years.” (P1) “My life has always been focused on these issues (...) and I have tried to cope with them as best as I could.” (P5)
Family as the primary source of purpose	Family relationships represented the most important source of meaning. Participants repeatedly identified children and grandchildren as central to their lives and current sense of purpose.	“My children are wonderful; they are my life.” (P8) “I believe my greatest achievement was having my children.” (P5)

Table 1. Cont.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotations
Generativity and legacy	Participants frequently described purpose in terms of raising children, transmitting values, and contributing to future generations. Legacy was primarily relational rather than material.	"Having a son and a daughter, raising them well (...) I think that is one of the greatest achievements of our lives." (P2) "When my children were born (...) that is the greatest source of pride in my life." (P7)
Adaptation to adversity	Purpose was maintained despite adversity, including poverty, illness, widowhood, migration, caregiving responsibilities, and socioeconomic hardship.	"I had the courage to return to Spain and start over again." (P4) "At the age of 18 I had to leave everything behind (...) but I was able to keep fighting." (P5)
Caregiving and responsibility	Caring for others emerged as a central source of meaning and self-definition, particularly among women. Responsibility for loved ones was often perceived as both a duty and a source of fulfilment.	"I was able to do it because others depended on me." (P5) "Having a child and raising him the way I did (...) that was the most beautiful thing in my life." (P3)
Positive ageing and resistance to ageist stereotypes	Most participants maintained a positive self-perception and did not identify with stereotypical images of old age. Several reported feeling substantially younger than their chronological age.	"I do not see myself as being 69 years old." (P3) "I do not feel 80 years old." (P7)

3.1. Purpose as Biographical Continuity

Participants described purpose as rooted in their life stories and personal identities. Rather than being centred on distant future goals, meaning was often built through continuity between past experiences, present actions, and enduring values. Life narratives, including achievements, relationships, sacrifices, and difficult periods, were central to this sense of coherence.

Across interviews, parenting, caregiving, work, migration, and overcoming adversity were repeatedly identified as experiences that continued to shape participants' sense of purpose in later life.

For many participants, the feeling of purpose was inseparable from the ability to recognise their own biography as meaningful. What they had lived through was not seen as finished or irrelevant, but as part of an ongoing story that continued to inform who they were and how they acted. As one participant reflected, "Those were very, very hard years (...) but we were very happy during those years", illustrating how even adverse experiences were integrated into a meaningful life narrative.

3.2. Purpose as Dynamic and Adaptive

Purpose is not perceived as something fixed. Life transitions such as retirement, illness, bereavement, and changes in family roles are an important part of how life purpose is perceived. Importantly, these transitions were not necessarily interpreted as a loss of meaning. Instead, participants often described them as opportunities to redefine what mattered and reorient their daily lives.

This adaptive process became visible in the way previous roles transformed into new forms of engagement. Some participants replaced the meaning of work with caring for others, volunteering, learning, community involvement, or maintaining meaningful relationships. Participants who experienced widowhood, illness, or migration frequently emphasised adaptation and perseverance, suggesting that purpose functioned as a flexible orientation shaped by changing circumstances rather than as a fixed life goal.

3.3. Legacy as a Central Pathway to Meaning

Legacy emerged as a core pathway through which participants gave meaning to the present. Across interviews, children and grandchildren were consistently identified as one of the most important sources of purpose. Participants frequently referred to raising children, supporting family members, and transmitting values as some of their greatest life achievements. They spoke about leaving something behind in the form of values, care, memories, knowledge, examples, or emotional bonds. Legacy was not limited to material inheritance; rather, it referred to what remained of a person's influence in the lives of others.

This theme connected the past with the future. Participants found meaning in contributing to children, grandchildren, partners, friends, and communities, often describing this contribution as a way of making life feel worthwhile. As one participant stated, "Having a son and a daughter, raising them well (...) is one of the greatest achievements of our lives". Legacy therefore functioned as a bridge between personal biography and social contribution.

3.4. Internal and External Conditions of Purpose

Purpose was influenced by both internal strengths and external conditions. Internal resources included resilience, psychological flexibility, active coping skills, and the ability to adjust expectations. External conditions included social support, access to resources, opportunities for participation, and experiences of age discrimination.

External conditions included social support, opportunities for participation, and recognition from family and community members. Family relationships emerged as the most important contextual resource for sustaining purpose. In contrast, health limitations and age-related losses were identified as challenges, although they were generally interpreted as requiring adaptation rather than signalling the end of a meaningful life. Evidence of internalised ageism was limited, with several participants reporting feeling younger than their chronological age and continuing to perceive themselves as capable, active, and socially useful.

4. Discussion

These findings suggest that purpose in later life should be understood as a dynamic and autobiographical construct rather than as a stable disposition that simply declines with age. Older adults appear to build purpose by integrating past experiences, current roles, and future-oriented meanings into a coherent narrative identity, whereby life transitions such as retirement, health changes, or bereavement become opportunities for reinterpretation and reorganization rather than losses of meaning [2,3,18]. From this perspective, purpose is sustained through biographical continuity, adaptation, and alignment with personal values, in line with lifespan and psychological flexibility approaches, including models such as Selective Optimization with Compensation and meaning-focused coping [5,8,9].

The findings also indicate that purpose in later life is shaped by both internal and external conditions, particularly social roles, age-related beliefs, and opportunities to contribute to others [19–21]. Participants' narratives suggest that meaningful roles such as parent, grandparent, caregiver, spouse, or community member remain central to identity, while lower levels of internalized ageism may protect against deficit-based views of ageing [10,11,13,14]. In this context, legacy and generativity emerge as especially relevant pathways to purpose, as meaning is expressed less through individual achievement than through care, the transmission of values, and symbolic continuity across generations [19–21]. Purpose in life has consistently been associated with better health outcomes and lower mortality, and to function as a psychological resource for ageing well, reinforcing the importance of maintaining purpose through meaningful activity and social engagement [4–6].

Overall, the results support an Eriksonian and contemporary view of generativity, suggesting that purpose in later adulthood is a relational and adaptive process embedded in biography and social context, should be understood as a dynamic and evolving construct, while also retaining elements of relative stability across the lifespan [7,15,16].

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the relatively small sample size, together with the cultural and contextual specificity of the participants, constrains the transferability of the results. In particular, the sample consisted of older adults engaged in a health center-based active ageing programme, with regular biweekly attendance, which suggests a group that may be more active, health-conscious, proactive, and socially engaged than the broader older population. This likely introduced a degree of self-selection bias, potentially shaping both the type of narratives elicited and the way purpose in life was articulated and negotiated. Accordingly, the present findings should be regarded as preliminary and exploratory rather than definitive, and they require confirmation in larger, more diverse, and socio-culturally heterogeneous samples.

Future research should further examine the interplay between ageism, identity, and purpose, as well as how these processes unfold across different ageing contexts and among older adults with varying levels of engagement in community or health-promotion activities. Such work would help clarify the robustness and boundary conditions of the present findings, while also strengthening their interpretive validity and explanatory reach.

5. Conclusions

Purpose in later life is not lost, but reshaped. It is grounded in identity, values, relationships, and contribution, and sustained through adaptive processes and supportive environments.

The key challenge is not to determine whether purpose exists in older age, but to understand how individuals and societies can create the conditions that allow it to be recognised, supported, and maintained.

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Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

ACT Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

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