

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04255-1 - Self and Meaning in the Lives of Older People:
Case Studies over Twenty Years
Peter G. Coleman, Christine Ivani-Chalian and Maureen Robinson
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Self and Meaning in the Lives of Older People

More than thirty-five years ago, a longitudinal study was established to research the health and well-being of older people living in an English city. *Self and Meaning in the Lives of Older People* provides a unique set of portraits of forty members of this group who were interviewed in depth from their later seventies onwards. Focusing on sense of self-esteem and, especially, of continued meaning in life following the loss of a spouse and onset of frailty, this book sensitively illustrates these persons' efforts to maintain independence, to continue to have a sense of belonging and to contribute to the lives of others. It examines both the psychological and the social resources needed to flourish in later life and draws attention to this generation's ability to benefit from strong family support and from belonging to a faith community. In conclusion, it questions whether future generations will be as resilient.

PETER G. COLEMAN is Emeritus Professor of Psychogerontology and an associate member of the Centre for Research on Ageing at the University of Southampton. His research relates to the mental health of older people, especially the functions of reminiscence and life review and sources of self-esteem and meaning in later life.

CHRISTINE IVANI-CHALIAN has specialized in the study of adult development and learning, with a master's thesis on the University of the Third Age and a PhD on disability and open learning. She has also worked for the Open University teaching on social care and social work courses.

MAUREEN ROBINSON obtained an MPhil in psychology while working on the initial stages of this project. She works as an independent advocate for older people and persons experiencing dementia and is a long-standing community activist, serving for more than twenty years as a local councillor and holding non-executive posts within the National Health Service and housing organizations.

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To Michael Hall and Roger Briggs, Professors Emeriti
of Geriatric Medicine, University of Southampton,
and to colleagues past and present in the
Southampton Medical School

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Preface and acknowledgements

This book was composed much later than we originally expected. There are many reasons for the delay, not least the increasingly competing pressures of academic life. But as a result we have found ourselves writing what is essentially an historical account of a previous generation's experience of later life. However, most studies of human development, and certainly longitudinal studies such as this, eventually become works of history. Particularly in a fast-changing society, each generation's experience of the life course is clearly different from the previous one, and what constitutes an age cohort of similar social experiences increasingly narrows. Even a five-year age difference can have substantial implications in terms of a person's social attitudes and expectations.

Nevertheless, there is still much to learn from the experience of those who have lived before because fundamental human needs do not change that quickly. This applies especially to the existential challenges and dilemmas posed by ageing, how, for example, to respond to the loss of one's life partner, the onset of physical and mental frailty, and the steady approach of one's own death. Considering how previous generations faced the kind of issues that we will all one day probably encounter is of perennial interest.

There are many people to thank for the possibility of producing what we consider to be a rather unique study of ageing based as it is on detailed case studies of forty people interviewed regularly over the last twenty and more years of their lives. First, there are those who devised the original Southampton Ageing Project, especially Michael Hall, holder of the founding chair in Geriatric Medicine at the University of Southampton, and Don Mercer in the Psychology Department; we also thank Schwarzhaupt of Cologne, the generous first sponsor of the initial data collection and analysis over the years 1977–80. Many contributed to this first exercise in conducting a longitudinal study of ageing in Southampton including Roger Briggs, Peter Coleman, Fiona Everett, Ros Gray, John Harris, Terry McEvoy, Bill MacLennan, Joan Punnett, Maureen Robinson, Mary Scarborough and John Timothy. Particular thanks are due to the various general medical practitioner practices in Southampton who supported the research and especially of course their patients who agreed to be participants in the study.

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With the encouragement of Roger Briggs, Michael Hall's successor as Professor of Geriatric Medicine, the second phase of the project on the later stages of ageing began ten years after the first. In 1988, the Medical School funded a ten-year follow-up of all the surviving Southampton Ageing Project participants, and a special mention must be made of the contribution of Anne Aubin, a mature medical student who collected and analyzed in depth the data on the younger members of this sample as part of her fourth-year medicine study in 1987–8. These data formed the basis for a subsequent research application to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). In 1990, the ESRC funded what would be the first of four grants (R000232182, R000234404, R000221633 and R000222535) given to the University Department of Geriatric Medicine through the 1990s to conduct detailed studies on surviving members of the sample. Accounts of the aims of these particular projects are given in Chapter 3. These studies were conducted principally by the three authors of this book, but we would like to thank Hazel Killham, who provided administrative help throughout the latter part of the Southampton Ageing Project and Mark Mullee for support with computing and statistical analyses.

Acknowledgements to the authors of theoretical ideas, measures and methods of research employed in the work reported in this book are given in Chapters 2 and 3. Particular thanks, however, should be expressed here to Freya Dittmann-Kohli and Helen Kivnick, whose methods for investigating perception of self and meaning in later life feature strongly in our accounts of the case studies.

All three authors have had a long association with the Southampton Ageing Project. Peter Coleman designed some and selected others of the psychosocial measures used in the study from 1977 onwards and took a leading part in their subsequent analysis. From 1987, he took over the direction of the second phase of the project. Maureen Robinson was also a member of the original research team and, remarkably, has been an interviewer at all eight data collection points from 1977 to 1999. Christine Ivani-Chalian joined us for the second phase of the study beginning in 1990. Like Maureen, she continued to interview her portion of the sample until 1999. Further details on the structure and character of the forty case studies on individual participants that they composed throughout the 1990s are given in Chapter 2.

Of course, these forty people deserve the major thanks for their generosity of spirit in opening up their lives for investigation through good and bad times and being prepared to engage with us, their interviewers, over such a long period. They did this in the hope that our accounts of their experiences of ageing would be of value to others. We in our turn hope that in the necessarily abridged versions of the interviews produced for this book, we have done justice to the information with which they entrusted us.