MEANINGFUL AGING: NEW CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS
Chair: P. Derkx, University of Humanistic Studies, Geldermalsen, Netherlands
Co-Chair: A. Machielse, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, Netherlands

This symposium focuses on how ‘aging’ people experience their lives as existential and socially situated processes from the perspective of a meaningful life course. Meaning-in-life is a comprehensive construct that is broadly conceptualised (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005; Brandstätter et al., 2012; Derkx, 2013; Stillman, et al., 2009). In this symposium a meaningful life is understood as a life in which basic needs for meaning are fulfilled, such as purpose, moral worth, self-worth, competence, comprehensibility, connectedness and excitement. The presented papers show the results of philosophical and empirical research into meaning-making in the life of older adults.

Derkx conceptualises a humanistic meaning frame that acknowledges and promotes the autonomous and responsible role of individuals in shaping their existence meaningfully. Duyndam reflects on personal uniqueness as a key concept of meaningful aging. Machielse provides insights into the relationship between meaning-making and social connectedness, using data from a qualitative study on urban elderly. Bos explores the experiences of meaning-in-life in an anthropological study on elderly people, aging in a rural orthodox-protestant community in the Netherlands. Duppen focuses on the experience of frail older adults’ meaning-in-life and their connectedness with their social environment in Belgium.

HUMANISM AND MEANING IN LIFE
P. Derkx, University of Humanistic Studies, Geldermalsen, Netherlands

Starting from Baumeister’s theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005) a theory of a meaningful life has been developed involving seven needs for meaning: needs for purpose, moral worth, self-worth, competence, comprehensibility, connectedness and excitement (Derkx 2013). More than Baumeister’s theory this one strikes a balance between agency and communion. After outlining the theory the value and relevance of a meaning perspective for aging well will be shown. Issues that will be dealt with in this context are: (1) the difference between a happy life (=> well-being) and a meaningful life, (2) continuity, disengagement and activity, (3) the social construction and institutionalisation of a standard life course, (4) individualistic coherence (identity) and ‘lateral’ (relational) integration, (5) resilience as recovery, resistance and reconfiguration (transformation), (6) the role of religion and worldview in relation to suffering, and (7) views of death, finitude, afterlife and (vertical and horizontal) transcendence.

MEANING IN LIFE AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
A. Machielse, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, Netherlands

This paper focuses on the relationship between meaning in life and social connectedness, the experience of belonging and relatedness between people. It is assumed that positive personal attachments contribute substantially to the capacity of making sense of one’s life. In turn, the experience of a meaningful life protects against the damaging effects of major life changes in various life domains, which tend to occur more often as people age. Our research provides valuable insight in ways older adults cope with losses, social impoverishment and disembeddedness, and how this influences their experience of a meaningful life. The data from a longitudinal study on 50 socially isolated older adults in the Netherlands are used to explore whether and how these elderly persons try to bring meaning into their lives and to what degree they succeed. The findings will centre upon the dimensions self-worth, competence and comprehensibility.

MEANING IN LIFE FOR FRAIL OLDER ADULTS: RESULTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY
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Frailty in later life is mostly associated with health decline and a greater risk in adverse events. Despite their situation, these frail older adults often manage to age in place and often play an active role in their family or community. This paper focuses on the experience of frail older adults’ meaning in life and their connectedness with their social environment. 121 semi-structured qualitative interviews of older adults in Belgium were analysed. 101 Respondents (aged 60 and over) were mildly or severely frail in the physical, social, psychological or environmental domain.

Findings indicate that, even severely frail older adults, experience a positive meaning in life. Key-dimensions of meaning in life were self- and moral worth, competence, purpose, connectedness, excitement and sense of coherence. The discussion highlights the various interpretations of the outcomes, while taking different frailty types and the social environment into account.

QUALITATIVE (ETHNOGRAPHIC) RESEARCH ON MEANING IN LIFE OF RURAL ELDERLY IN THE NETHERLANDS
P. Bos, University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht, Utrecht, Netherlands

This paper is an anthropological investigation and based upon in-depth interviews and thick descriptions (participant observations) collected among elderly persons in a rural orthodox protestant area (1600 citizens) in the Netherlands.
Data are collected from people who are 75 or older and who are ageing in a context where families traditionally live in inter-generational households (extended families). Our findings are centred upon dimensions such as purpose, moral worth, self-worth, competence, comprehensibility, connectedness and excitement. Hence, the paper explores meaning in life of people who are embedded in a family –, religious- and village-community.

SESSION 4835 (SYMPOSIUM)

WELL-BEING AS A PATHWAY TO REACHING THE EXTREMES OF HUMAN LIFESPAN
Chair: S.L. Andersen, New England Centenarian Study, Boston, Massachusetts
Co-Chair: D.S. Jopp, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland
Discussant: M. Ardelt, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida

Genetics have been found to account for only a portion of the ability of long-lived individuals and their family members to remain in good health. Therefore other factors, such as psychosocial dimensions, may play a role in increased health spans and longevity. In particular, well-being has been associated with mental and physical health and social and environmental relationships. Higher well-being including lower stress levels and positive mood are associated with favorable biological processes, positive health outcomes, and reduced mortality. Therefore cohorts of long-lived individuals present a unique opportunity to study the association and interaction of well-being with longevity and other psychosocial variables.

This symposium addresses several facets of well-being among long-lived individuals. In the Fordham Centenarian Study meaning in life and will to live had more significant effects on well-being than health factors. Among centenarians from two Portuguese Centenarian Studies, spontaneous recollection of the past was common and generally positive, however, some centenarians avoid reminiscing due to negative effects of this behavior on their well-being. Better scores on indices of successful aging were found among elders from an area of Sardinia noted for exceptional longevity. Furthermore, it was determined that social desirability was an important factor affecting indices of successful aging in this unique cohort. The New England Centenarian Study found that centenarian offspring have higher levels of purpose in life than the general population indicating that well-being may be an important factor throughout the life course rather than just at the end of life for individuals predisposed to longevity.

MEANING IN LIFE AND WILL TO LIVE AS PREDICTORS OF WELL-BEING IN CENTENARIANS
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Existential factors such as meaning in life and will to live are assumed to be important factors for well-being in very old age, yet only few studies have examined these variables in centenarians to date. The present study investigates the effect of meaning in life and will to live in the context of age-associated health restrictions (number of diseases, subjective health, health restrictions), using data from the Fordham Centenarian Study (N = 119, Mage = 99.25 years). Regression findings indicated that both meaning in life and will to live had strong direct effects on well-being, including life and aging satisfaction. Health factors were, in comparison, less important or non-significant. Significant mediation or moderation effects were not found. In sum, findings underscore the important role of existential factors in very advanced age and underscore the importance of addressing these factors to ensure high quality of life in very old age.

REMINISCENCE AND WELL-BEING IN CENTENARIANS

Recollecting past experiences and events is expected to be spontaneous and frequent in old age, and is potentially related to a feeling of wellbeing and contentment. Few studies however have explored the emotions present in such an activity in centenarians. This quasi-qualitative study draws from the Portuguese Centenarian Study (PT100) and describes the frequency of spontaneous reminiscence activities, its elicited emotions, functions (e.g. ego-integrity), and associated psychosocial variables (valuation of life, satisfaction with life, depression, anxiety, loneliness) in a sample of 78 centenarians aged 100 to 108 years (M=101.0; SD=1.5). Results show that for most centenarians (n=43) thinking about the past is a regular and positive activity but significantly associated with feelings of loneliness; a subgroup of centenarians present an active avoidance of the activity, as it is embedded in negative and/or ambivalent feelings that influence current perceived wellbeing. These findings highlight the need for carefully planning reminiscence interventions in very advanced ages.

SARDINIAN ELDERS: SUCCESSFUL AGING AND PSYCHOSOCIAL RORRELATES DESPITE RESPONSE BIAS
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Extreme variance in the prevalence of successful ageing (SA) has been observed raising concern over the generalizability of findings. The study of populations characterized by SA is one solution to this problem. A total of 226 cognitively healthy community-dwelling participants aged 75–103, from the Blue Zone region of Sardinia were recruited and completed a range of indices of SA. Putative psychosocial correlates of SA were also assessed along with a measure of social desirability. After controlling significant social desirability bias, multiple indices of SA were found to be high relative to Italian cutoffs and differed between age groups and genders. A significant proportion of the variance in SA indices was explained by social desirability, perceived physical health,