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Perspectives on creative well-being of older adults

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ABSTRACT

The growing aging population has become a significant global issue in recent years, increasing the need for research that examines aging-related phenomena such as personal growth and development in later life. A major challenge in achieving this aim is the prevailing deficit perspective on aging, which is so pervasive that it often overshadows older adults' contributions to society and diminishes the opportunities encountered in older adulthood. Although perspectives on the nature of aging are gradually changing in a positive way, and the developments in medicine are improving health-related aspects of aging, it is still a worldwide challenge to eradicate negative stereotypes around aging. This article explores empirical perspectives on aging by analyzing diverse narratives gathered from open-ended interviews we conducted in Finland from 2019 to 2021. Focusing on their aging experiences and the value of a broad range of creative engagements and interventions that older adults have joined voluntarily, the study aims to provide a better understanding of personal perspectives of aging, the creative well-being of older adults, and the growing diversity of experiences within the older age group. Based on the findings of this study, we highlight the importance of promoting older adults' engagement in art-based interventions to enhance their creativity and well-being in later life, as well as fostering aging-friendly co-creative approaches in such interventions by involving the older adults themselves in the process.

Introduction

As the world population continues to age, the number of challenges faced by modern society to better accommodate this important segment of the population is also increasing. Sadly, many perceptions of aging are often negative, and a wide range of ageist stereotypes and biases exist in Western societies (Comincioli, Chirico, Gaggioli, & Masoodian, 2021; Comincioli, Hakoköngäs, & Masoodian, 2022). Ageism remains “the last socially acceptable form of discrimination” (Kagan, 2008, 2012; Binstock, 2010, as cited in Kagan & Melendez-Torres, 2015, p. 644), which has embedded itself in a variety of forms across societies and cultures, usually framed “in claims of ‘best interest’ or in humour”, but ultimately leads to neglect (Kagan & Melendez-Torres, 2015, p. 644). As with most complex social challenges, there are many factors contributing to ageism (Marques et al., 2020), which in turn remain a significant threat to the well-being of older adults (Marques et al., 2020).

Social stereotypes about older people, and the resulting ageist discrimination against them, can reduce the availability of dignified care provisions for aging people (Archibald & Kitson, 2020), as well as deny older adults their sense of self-identity (Koch, Power, & Kralik, 2007). Similarly, the existing deficit perspectives (Archibald & Kitson, 2020)

with a pervasive focus on challenges and problems of aging often tend to overshadow older adults' contributions to society and significantly diminish the opportunities that are available to people in their older age (Carr, Wellin, & Reece, 2009).

To tackle such negative stigma and stereotypes around aging, a growing number of research studies have been carried out in recent years (Chacur, Serrat, & Villar, 2022), seeking ways to support and mitigate these challenges in collaboration with different sectors involved with aging concerns. More specifically, there is an increasing interest in art-based methods and interventions that offer the potential for new opportunities to target socially perpetuated negative beliefs in creative ways. Taking these discussions and approaches into account, the use of creative engagements in improving health and well-being across the life course is also on the rise. However, most of the research on such art-based interventions has mainly focused on the benefits of the intervention outcomes, in what Beard (2012) refers to as “an overt bias toward clinical outcomes” (p. 645).

In a recent review of related literature, Chacur et al. (2022) conclude that there is a gap in this area of research, and call for more research on: 1) a wider range of artistic activities, 2) the costs and other barriers negatively impacting older adults' participation in such activities, 3) the

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diversity of older adults and their voices, 4) the life-course perspectives of older adults, and 5) the contextual view of such research (Chacur et al., 2022).

The objective of the study presented in this article is to provide empirical perspectives on the value of art-based and creative engagements in later life and identify their impacts on older adults' creative well-being.¹ The study attempts to examine the components of creative well-being and how pursuing late-life creativity affects older adults' active aging and the dynamics of their inner drive in later life – or what Cohen (2004, 2009) calls “inner push”. The purpose of such an attempt is to formulate ways of assisting older adults in becoming more effective participants in co-developing inclusive and responsive art-based interventions.

Therefore, this study has taken an empirical approach to explore older adults' perspectives on aging by analyzing diverse narratives gathered from qualitative interviews that were conducted in Finland over the course of two years (2019–2021). Focusing on older adults' experiences of aging, and the value of a broad range of creative engagements and interventions that they have participated in, the study has investigated common themes regarding the notion of getting older and various elements contributing to creative, healthy aging and ways of improving the quality of life and well-being of older adults. In particular, the study has focused on the importance of improving older adults' creativity through diverse activities which may contribute in crucial ways to their participants' well-being in later life.

We start the article by providing an overview of the relevant perspectives on aging and existing research on the creative well-being of older adults and art-based interventions aimed at them. We then present our narrative interview study involving aging people taking part in art-based activities. We conclude by discussing the findings of our study and its contributions to research in this area.

Subjective aging and self-perceptions of aging

Stereotypical views of aging are related to loss and decline with accompanying physical, psychological, social, and behavioral changes (Wurm, Diehl, Kornadt, Westerhof, & Wahl, 2017). However, such negative views on aging fail to consider that older adults demonstrate enormous inter-individual differences in how they view themselves and experience their lives (Tully-Wilson et al., 2021). The importance of understanding each individual's sense of competence and mastery about their relationships, goals, and other significant aspects of their lives is becoming increasingly apparent (Tully-Wilson et al., 2021). This means that the notion of aging needs to move beyond objective definitions, as older adults have different perspectives as they age.

Diehl et al. (2014) note that researchers in aging-related fields of study, such as developmental psychology, psychological aging, and other social sciences, have been writing about subjective constructions of age and aging for over 40 years (e.g., Kastenbaum et al., 1972; Montepare, 2009; Settersten, 1999, as cited in Diehl et al., 2014). Based on these studies, it has been observed that people reflect on their aging as they move through life and interpret it based on their own experiences (Diehl et al., 2014). As such, the concept of self-perceptions of aging has emerged as a focal point of empirical research in recent years. According to Diehl et al. (2014), individuals' self-perceptions of aging stem from their personal experiences, which are multidimensional, and while they occur at a preconscious and implicit level, they can also be consciously and explicitly expressed if circumstances are favorable. This means that the internalized age stereotypes of older individuals have a significant impact on their self-perceptions of aging (Levy, Slade, Kunzel, & Kasl, 2002). Therefore, the self-perception of aging – whether

positively or negatively – affects the advancing chronological age, which is associated with subsequent functional health related to a person's physical, psychological, and social well-being (Diehl et al., 2014). As such, individuals' attitude toward their aging significantly impacts their health and life expectancy (Wurm et al., 2017). This implies that research on aging must consider the need to investigate pathways and mechanisms through which views on aging affect health and longevity when examining qualitative perceptions of older adults (Wurm et al., 2017).

In summary, aging should be defined not simply by objective indicators – often influenced by pervasive societal biases and stereotypes – but by a wide variety of subjective experiences and situations (Tully-Wilson et al., 2021). In addition, differences within and between cultures and countries should also be considered (Tully-Wilson et al., 2021). By doing so, we will be able to take a qualitative leap toward increasing older adults' abilities, and focusing on “creating the conditions in which people can thrive, on their own terms, as they age” (Martinson & Berridge, 2015, p. 66).

Creative well-being through art-based interventions

The role of creative arts in enhancing well-being in therapeutic and quality-of-life settings is increasingly recognized (e.g., Rappaport, 2010, as cited in Gutheil & Heyman, 2016). The work of Cohen et al. (2006, 2007) has demonstrated that creative engagement has a positive impact on older adults' physical and mental health, even reducing the chance of falls and other age-related physical problems. Therefore, the use of arts in health is not only to promote well-being and improve quality of life but also to target medical health problems as well (Cox et al., 2010). For instance, arts and health programs can provide opportunities for older adults to share their personal stories through creative expressions, and this can aide recovery from medical conditions, as well as lead to empowerment and foster a sense of belonging to a community (Cox et al., 2010). In terms of aesthetic and artistic activities specifically, Wikström (2004) provides some evidence for the various potentials of aesthetic expression as means of discovering, preserving, or enhancing the quality of life in old age. Similarly, Reynolds (2010) has shown the benefits of artistic engagement for older adults' growth on a personal and social level. Indeed, numerous evidence-based investigations have continuously studied the advantages of older adults taking part in multidimensional art activities (e.g., Gallistl, 2021; Noice, Noice, & Kramer, 2014).

It is not surprising, therefore, that existing examples of creative interventions for older adults have raised awareness of the potential of arts programs in promoting healthy aging (Cox et al., 2010). In terms of creativity and aging, many researchers have noted (Gutheil & Heyman, 2016) the importance of the theoretical approach proposed by Cohen (2006) and Cohen et al. (2006). Cohen (2006) has proposed that creativity and aging are driven by two major perspectives – the sense of control and social engagement – that are synergistic through the catalytic effects of art. Cohen (2006) has also highlighted that “[a]rt activities are especially good because they are more likely to be sustained, and just like the impact of physical exercise over the long term, the benefits of challenges for the brain increase when they are ongoing” (p. 10). This view identifies clear mechanisms for explaining how continued creative engagement and imagination can result in positive outcomes despite overwhelming challenges at old age. Furthermore, Cohen (2006) examined a series of human developmental phases in the second half of life which reveal individuals' dynamics of inner drives that foster psychological growth throughout the life cycle. According to this study, such inner drives open up new opportunities to activate older adults' untapped strengths and explore their creative potential as they age (Cohen, 2006, 2009). Reynolds (2010) also emphasized the sensual aspects of art-making, which can enhance older adults' well-being by enriching their inner worlds with sensual pleasures.

¹ Note that the study uses the term “creative well-being” to refer to creativity as a source of well-being, and specifically creative engagement and its impact on physical, mental and social well-being.

The study

The data collection for the study presented in this article was undertaken between 2019 and 2021 in Finland, mainly in the capital region and a small town in the southwest of the country. Our mode of inquiry for this study was based on a narrative approach. As part of this study, we used a narrative interview method to attend to diverse narratives of older adults' experiences to identify the main components of creative well-being in later life and to highlight the importance of fostering late-life creativity for aging people.

A narrative is a type of knowledge that makes a moment of inter-subjective experience knowable or discernible through communication (McQuillan, 2000). Kim (2015) notes that "narrative is one of the few human endeavours that is widely spread as a basic aspect of human life and an essential strategy of human expression" (p. 32). Since telling stories and listening to them is a significant daily activity for most people, "it appears to be an essential component of human thought, communication, and interaction" (DeVereaux & Griffin, 2016, p. 1). Narratives shape our realities and modes of being, as we organize and interpret our experiences through narratives, and assign meanings to them through storytelling (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). As such, in the context of aging studies, narratives of aging are becoming increasingly acknowledged as means of providing critical insights into gerontological understanding (Zeilig, 2011). Such narratives can be further sharpened by explicitly examining how individual agency and social structures interact to shape aging experiences (Zeilig, 2011).

According to Kim (2015), narrative inquiry methods can be divided into three main categories: autobiographical, biographical, and art-based. The present study adapted the biographical narrative inquiry approach, which aims to uncover people's lived experiences and their own perspectives on their daily lives (Denzin, 1989). Indeed, since "[o]ur lives and experiences are as much biographical as they are biological" (Birren et al., 1996, as cited in de Vries, 2015, p. 337), biographical approaches, such as narratives, life stories, and autobiographical material, allow us to gain insight into the commonality and idiosyncrasies of aging as a whole (Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). In this regard, this type of narrative method looks at people's past, present, and future and tries to see how they make sense of their own lives by telling their own stories (Denzin, 1989).

In particular, the concept of "life story" is an essential part of the biographical narrative inquiry and works as a "method of looking at life as a whole and of carrying out an in-depth study of individual lives" (Atkinson, 2012, p. 116). Life stories allow sharing "common interests in personal accounts in a manner that respects and values what people have to say" (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000, as cited in Kim, 2015, p. 120). The life story narrative can be understood as the outcome of a life story interview, which aims to draw out central features of what has happened to individual interviewees – such as the important events of their lives, their experiences, and feelings – through transcribed interactions between the interviewer and the storytellers – i.e., the individual interviewees (Atkinson, 2007).

This study has, therefore, used the biographical narrative approach

to life stories as a means of empirical data collection and as a ground-work for co-creative approaches to art-based interventions. Through this interdisciplinary approach of utilizing narrative inquiry methods, the study attempted to gain a broader understanding of the life experiences of its participants from various angles while also engaging them more effectively as main collaborators in co-creative art-based interventions.

Study participants

The study participants were 18 women aged 58–86, each of whom belonged to one of three different groups, depending on the creative engagements they were associated with. Table 1 provides a summary of the three groups and their creative activities. In addition, the list below gives an overview description of each of the groups.

• Group 1 (Participants: P1–P6, Individual interviews)

Six women in their mid-to-older-age, who live in a housing community in urban surroundings in the Helsinki capital region of Finland. The main operating concept of the community is active and action-oriented aging, with all members of the community being required to participate in its shared tasks and duties. The community provides an environment for active social life, offering various group activities to its members to allow them to share their knowledge and interests.

• Group 2 (Participants: FG07–FG15, Focus group)

Nine women in their late-50s to mid-70s, who have lived for most of their lives in a rural environment near a small town on the southwest coast of Finland. This region has had very few opportunities for participation in artistic or cultural events. However, a creative collaboration with a community artist through an international artists' residency program gave voice to the complexity of their life experiences using a co-creative (co-decision-making) process. The artist and the participants have continued to not only undertake multiple projects using various art forms but have also made contributions to their community politics and its development through their critical social engagement.

• Group 3 (Participants: P16–P18, Individual interviews)

Three retirement-aged women who have been involved in arts activities, as well as being engaged in various community-based societal activities. To be more precise, P16 and P17 have been involved with a group of environmental activists, and P18 participates in a broad range of volunteering activities, particularly food-aid.

Narrative interviews and data collection

All narrative interviews were carried out in person, except for one which was conducted online using a video-conferencing tool preferred by the participant involved. The face-to-face interviews were carried out either in the homes of the participants or in public places, such as a cafe

Table 1

Overview of the three groups that took part in our study and their creative activities.

Group (participants: no.)	Interview	Age	Creative activities
Group 1 (Participants: P1–P6) Individuals living in a housing community	Individual	58–86	Languages, Crafts (textile work), Painting, Singing, Photography, Dancing, Creative writing, etc.
Group 2 (Participants: FG07–FG15) Individuals belonging to an artistic project group	Focus group	58–76	Crafts (textile work, installation), Performance
Group 3 (Participants: P16–P18) Individuals being engaged in arts activities and various community-based activities	Individual	63–71	Painting, Crafts (textile work), Social and community activities

or a local arts residence facility. The participants were interviewed once, either as individuals (those in Groups 1 and 3) or as part of a focus group (those in Group 2). The focus group session aimed to gather the participants' experiences both at the personal as well as the group level, following a method proposed by Rubin and Babbie (2016), according to which “a small group of people are brought together to engage in a guided discussion of a specified topic” (p. 621). Gutheil and Heyman (2016) note that: “Hearing a group share and reflect on their own and other's experiences helps add a different dimension to research on creative art programs” (p. 172). As such, our focus group session made it possible to elicit from the participants their forgotten narratives or more details, especially about particular episodes, while also helping us to understand their shared knowledge.

The interviews took around 60–90 min each. The interviews were semi-structured using open-ended non-directive questions, which aimed to seek each interviewee's personal life story. While this biographical narrative approach aims to give space for highly personal accounts, it is necessary to be aware of common narratives that tend to be chosen as appropriate to be told in such shared contexts. Therefore, in the analysis section below, we will indicate some instances of such common cultural narratives that were revealed.

The open-ended interview questions were divided into different topics and grouped together into four parts. Each part also had some additional sub-questions and open topics to help the interviewees answer the questions in more detail using their own life stories. Some topics focused mainly on obtaining further details from the participants if they wanted to describe their answers more fully. Appendix 1 provides a summary of the open-ended questions used in the narrative interviews.

The nature of narrative research presents multiple challenges that require a keen eye for gathering extensive information about the participant and understanding the explicit context of the individual's life (Creswell & Poth, 2016). At this point, the importance of the researcher's positionality – cultural insider or outsider status – can significantly impact the entire research process when conducting cross-cultural and sensitive research (Manohar, Liamputtong, Bhole, & Arora, 2017). Cultural insiders can have a better chance of conducting this type of research as they share cultural commonalities that make it easier for them to establish rapport and trust with their research participants (Shariff, 2014). However, cultural outsiders may also be able to gain a deeper understanding and explanation of a phenomenon (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008; Liamputtong, 2010) without having any inherent biases that hinder the rise of provocative questions (Merriam et al., 2001) (all cited in Manohar et al., 2017). The question of insider or outsider positionality and how it affects research knowledge and ethics is an enduring debate in ethnographic research (Geertz, 1973), including in the anthropology of health and well-being (e.g., Dilger, Huschke, & Mattes, 2015). Both positions have their advantages and require careful ethical reflection.

Since all the narrative interview participants were Finnish speakers,

and the interviewer (the first listed author) was not, the individual interviews were conducted in English – it being the shared language. However, for the focus group interview session (Group 2), a professional interpreter translated the conversations between Finnish and English. Positioning ourselves as cultural outsiders, we first organized introductory meetings with facilitators who had worked with participants for a long time to prevent potential weaknesses in the study. In addition to this, the facilitators helped elaborate and frame the data collection process by offering additional materials – such as an archive of photos, videos and publications that present the history of the group's creative engagements – to better understand the participants' cultural and living context. A facilitator also attended the focus group session (discussion with Group 2), to help reduce any vulnerability that the participants might feel from having to communicate with the interviewer through a translator, as well as checking for any unnoticed and/or ignored narratives.

All the interviews were recorded using a digital voice-recorder, and we made field notes during the interviews as well. To avoid any misunderstandings during the interviews, we repeated our understanding of the participants' answers back to them and summarized the answers again at the end of each question to further confirm the accuracy of our understanding. After each interview, we reviewed the recordings and transcribed them for data analysis.

Data analysis and findings

The transcribed narrative interview data and field notes were analyzed following a documentary method of data interpretation (Nohl, 2010). As a method for interview analysis, the process of the documentary interpretation of narrative interviews is accomplished in two steps, involving “formulating analysis and documentary meaning” (Gallistl, 2021, p. 2604), which provide the theoretical basis for elucidating the participants' implicit or intuitive understandings (Bohnsack, 2010). For the first step – formulating analysis – the current study adopted a thematic networks analysis approach, which consisted of identifying and uncovering salient themes within transcribed interviews (i.e., textual data) by organizing principles and representational means (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This led to identifying two global themes (superordinate themes) and five organizing themes (subordinate themes) in the interview material (see Table 2). In the second step – documentary meaning – the latent meaning of each dataset was examined. The themes commonly addressed by the study participants were: 1) components of creative well-being; and 2) aging and creativity.

All the study participants were Finnish women, most of whom were born after the Second World War. As such, two major wars in the context of Finnish history (the Finnish Winter War of 1939 and the Second Soviet-Finnish War of 1941–1944) were part of their early childhood and contributed to difficult times in their lives after the war. Indeed, most of the interviewees said such hardship in their early life naturally

Appendix 1. A summary of the open-ended questions used in the narrative interviews.

Parts	Theme	Topics
Part 1	Biographical information	Hometown; occupation; family; childhood; relationships; marriage life; children; life routines; friends and neighbors; hobbies; etc.
Part 2	Information about community-based or creative group activities participants are currently participating in, or doing personally	Name and brief description; serious hobbies and mundane activities; initial reason and goals
Part 3	Meaning and value of participation in a group, or various activities	Position and the ongoing/future plans for the group; importance of the activity itself; opportunities and challenges; impact of the activity on yourself (sense of identity, confidence, etc.) and society, etc.
Part 4	Aging and creative social engagement (creativity development)	Awareness of aging; perception of aging; specific aging experiences (physically and emotionally); goals for well-being; quality of life; etc.

Table 2

A summary of the main codes identified in the narrative interview data using the thematic networks analysis method.

Global themes (Superordinate themes)	Organizing themes (Subordinate themes)	Basic themes (topics)
Components of creative well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Creative engagement through social and cultural activities – Social well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Personal interests; social participation; contribution to the society – Value of late-life; honor; identity; self-confidence; acknowledgment
Aging and creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Active aging – Personal growth – Late-life creativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Life situation; health problems; financial status; community resources – Motivation; tools for discovering one's hidden talents; skills development; learning; branching points in life

influenced their attitudes toward aging and well-being, largely depending on their living conditions, social and material status, and environments throughout their life course. Therefore, one would assume that such early life events and experiences have affected and shaped the values of maintaining independence and preserving dignity in the later lives of our study participants. Therefore, it is understandable why several narratives in both individual and group interviews which emphasize independence and dignity, have been used to discuss the motivation that enables them to keep their individual identities and social relationships in later life. This is particularly true in the ways in which they have pursued values related to feeling connected to others with a sense of identity, having a higher level of self-esteem and confidence, and having a sense of safety and well-being. While doing so, art-based or creative engagements seem to have provided our study participants with a means to pursue and show these values.

Components of creative well-being

Our study findings clearly show that the participants derived great pleasure from being involved in a broad range of creative activities – not just art-based – and this made them feel privileged and have a sense of solidarity. Creative activities also contributed to a sense of belonging in their later life by enhancing their social relationships. As a result, this added purposefulness greatly increased their quality of life by helping them overcome feelings of isolation, being a burden to others, or lack of being respected. In this regard, the study showed that these tendencies and examples demonstrate what older adults consciously consider as some of the components that play a key role in enhancing their quality of life and well-being in the later part of their lives.

Despite the positive responses mentioned above, not wanting to be a “burden” was the most common topic among the interviewees regarding their well-being in later life. In supporting this idea, Participant 1 mentioned:

I came to Finland from abroad to marry my Finnish husband. We travelled and moved a lot because of my husband's job. I was mostly a housewife taking care of my family. By reflecting on my life as a whole, I have had a very satisfying life. I am happy to see my kids are grown up well, and grandchildren as well. All moments and stages of my life's journey are important and meaningful. Although I got cancer two times, I now feel grateful that I could go through hard times very well. So, at present I have a wonderful feeling to do whatever I want and manage my life by myself.²

In terms of the importance of social interaction within the community where older adults belong, Participant 5 described:

I moved here in particular because then I wouldn't be a worry to my children, when I got cancer back in the day, my ex-husband also found that he had two cancers. I knew that he was already very much

a concern to my children. So, I wanted to make sure they don't have to worry about me and my daily life, as I'm here with my close neighbors, in a secured and well-equipped place.

In addition to these examples, one of the participants from the focus group (FG07) expressed some of the preoccupations and negative feelings associated with older age:

We are all baby-boomers and have lived in a small place in the countryside. We have worked so hard in our entire lives. We have committed ourselves to our families as care givers. Our main job was taking care of the cows, chickens, and working in the fields, also cooking food, and weaving rugs. Despite this, we are no longer involved in a working life, and we feel empty and lost as old women. Also, it's easily to feel shame and guilt when getting older as pensioners.

A dominant theme among these Finnish women was that not being a burden to their families or society at large was an important value. This view can be understood to reflect Nordic working ethics. Most of the study participants mentioned trying to remain as “valuable” as before, for instance, by helping to take care of their grandchildren, volunteering, or even organizing groups to promote the value of their personal knowledge gained through aging. Such ideas and their efforts to be valuable encouraged their active participation in various creative activities and ultimately led to expanding their social contacts as well as improving their social well-being. Socializing became a value of its own. Participant 4, for example, noted:

As I have some physical health problems, I don't have to go to anywhere else while I live in this communal residence. It is very nice to have friends around here and there are many different hobby groups that I can enjoy.

By participating in diverse social engagements with creative pursuits, older adults can find – and even redefine – their identity and boost their self-esteem, thus enabling them to achieve creative well-being, also by increasing their social participation well into the later stages of their lives. For instance, as Participant 17 mentioned:

Aging gives me freedom. No need to be a mom or family care giver anymore, so I have much more spare time to focus on myself. As I got older, I believe more strongly in the value of friendship, hobbies, and my relatives that have important meaning to me. Maybe I'm lucky because I don't feel any risk or threat from anything, as I don't have an insecure life. As a granny, I'm proud of my identity. I pursue an aim with my colleagues to promote the word ‘granny’ as being more powerful and being experts in giving a positive meaning to the world and to society.

This excerpt is an example of a positive reflection on one's identity and the meaning of aging in a social and creative context.

Interestingly, according to many of our study participants, the most crucial factors toward their active social participation accompanying their creative pursuits were to feel and cultivate mutual support and empathy. Our study participants repeatedly underlined the value of a supportive and cooperative atmosphere in their activity groups, where

² Note that while the participants' quotes provided in this article are not always verbatim, or direct translations from Finnish, they provide an accurate expression of what was said.

everyone's efforts and ideas are respected and appreciated. We observed this particularly in our focus group. Although these study participants already knew each other before joining their community-based group activity, back then, they barely had a conversation with each other and did not make any effort to develop close relationships with one another. Once they had joined the activity group, however, they became more open to each other and started to share the joys and sorrows of their lives with others in their group. This was because they developed mutual trust, and it eventually became possible for them to obtain a lot of emotional support from others when some experienced difficult periods. One of the participants (FG09) from the focus group described this communality as a life-changing experience:

Most of the process [in our group] went pretty smoothly. We democratically decided different things. When someone provided a good idea, we could just easily add some other ideas to it. This artistic experience brought us something meaningful, made us feel not just doing ordinary 'work' but doing different things. It brought fresh air into our lives, and made us feel refreshed in a different way than we have ever felt before. Our lives were saved, and it made us feel capable of doing something more. Our lives were getting richer, and we felt proud and grateful. Also feeling more privileged that we were especially involved in this group. The most important feeling was that we are doing things together [for the community].

This section has provided a summary of how the study participants perceive their later life as older adults, and what elements of different activities in which they participant they believe to improve their creative well-being. The study found that social activity is a crucial dimension of creative well-being. Resonating with our research material, we presuppose that, through active engagement in social and cultural activities, older adults can help not only themselves but also others – especially younger people – to better appreciate the positive aspects of aging. In addition, older adults can further participate in the process of taking on, for instance, social, ecological, or ethical responsibilities. The current study can be interpreted to indicate that, through various creative engagements involving their personal interests and own creativity, older adults can bring about a change in society by demonstrating different aspects of their lives and values to society as aging people.

Aging and creativity

The results of the study show that the relationship between aging and creativity appears in different ways and varies from person to person. Although our study participants narrated a variety of experiences and perspectives about aging and creativity, they mostly shared a common concept of how they achieve active aging and apply the dynamics of their inner drives by pursuing creativity in later life.

First, art-making activities were valued for helping the study participants to overcome the uncertainty of life after retirement. Through artistic pursuits that offered newly experienced sensual pleasures and satisfactory accomplishments, some of the study participants were able to enrich their inner lives by improving their self-esteem and confidence. In relation to this perception, Participant 18 observed:

After retirement [...] people have to think about the rest of their life. That possibly causes depression and feelings of restlessness in people. I met 'art' at that point and tried to involve myself in many different volunteering jobs, as well as taking art courses on purpose. Pursuing creativity was very helpful to overcome that uncertain moment and achieve active aging now.

As the quote shows, art can function as a psychological resource in challenging phases of aging. Similarly, Participant 16 elaborated this further to include social spheres where artistic work can express something meaningful to other people:

There is no specific reason why I keep doing creative activities, but obviously it makes me feel confident and builds my self-esteem. I also like to show my artwork to many people and see how they feel. If there is something I'm not satisfied with, I can also decide to re-paint it or move to a white canvas and start a new work. I think my creativity is developed by repeating this process again and again.

For some older adults, creative experiences can, for example, lead to a turning point in life or seem like a total game-changer in their later lives by helping them discover their hidden talents in the arts. Our study indeed shows that these meaningful discoveries can stimulate older adults to develop new skills and expertise through a lifelong learning process, and ultimately such outcomes give them better confidence in pursuing creative activities. Furthermore, a few participants who were still in the employment sector used creativity as a tool not only for taking a break from their demanding jobs but also helping them to immerse themselves in their job again with new inspiration. In reference to this point, Participant 17, for instance, mentioned:

Engaging in art experiences and using my hands is a kind of therapy for me. It is a means of not only getting relaxed after my demanding job as a medical doctor but also giving me a new motivation to get back to my hard work with newly charged energy. Creativity has developed my views of enjoying the nature and humans. It has allowed me to have different ways of looking at many other things as well.

To attend closely to late-life creativity, some of our study participants most actively engaged in arts-based creative activities emphasized that their aging process, particularly in art-making, takes place through developing their creative expression, especially in skillful ways. By immersing themselves deeply in various types of artistic activities, such as playing with colors and experimenting with different materials, older adults are able to develop their artistic skills and expand their creativity. Personal development in artistic skills was something participants found highly enjoyable. For example, one of the participants (FG11) in the focus group noted:

Cultivating creativity was one of the outcomes of our creative group activities. Playing with different colors, materials, and shapes of objects made us get sophisticated when it comes to choosing colors and making compositions. It opened our eyes more aesthetically.

In addition, the focus group participants mentioned that they have not only expanded their views of arts but have also changed their insights on the greater meaning of life. Creative experiences in later life influenced the creativity of our study participants in a multidimensional way, affecting how they perceive other things such as nature or physical aspects of their lives, or helping them handle their physical health problems in a positive and creative way.

It is, however, also true that not every older adult is interested in arts or other creative activities. The interests of individuals are different and depend on their life situations, such as having limitations due to health problems or finances or the availability of community resources (Stephenson, 2010). Despite these differences, people are becoming increasingly more aware that participation in creative activities in older age can help them achieve improved health and well-being (Stephenson, 2010). As will be discussed in the next section, fostering late-life creativity for older adults can indeed contribute to improved quality of care, and therefore better co-planning of art-based interventions for older adults is of utmost importance in helping future aging communities.

Discussion

Overall, the study demonstrates the impact of various forms of art-based engagements and interventions on the creative well-being of older adults by changing their perspectives – as well as those of others – on aging in a positive way. Older adults' participation in such creative

activities has, for instance, helped them to not only achieve greater social well-being but also to pursue their own personal goals in later life.

Based on the study findings, we emphasize the positive value of creative engagement and raise the importance of fostering late-life creativity in older adults. As mentioned earlier, in terms of creativity and aging, there has been an expanding body of research demonstrating that the creative arts can be a path to continued personal growth during later life (Gutheil & Heyman, 2016). Indeed, as Reynolds (2010) reports, creativity does not have to diminish with aging, and older adults can gain personal and social benefits from participating in artistic activities, including “meaning, purpose, challenge, and a positive identity” (p. 137). Similarly, Cohen (2000a) has noted that “creativity has always been there with aging, but many have not recognized or searched for it in themselves in later life because society has so denied, trivialized, or maligned it with advancing years” (p. 1). Cohen (2000a) further highlights the importance of understanding the creative potential related to aging, because it would allow older people to discover their underlying skills and talents in their old age, as well as helping younger people to consider the challenges they might face in their later life in a different way.

Thus, we agree with Gallistl (2021) that “change in perspective on late-life creativity consequently sheds new light on the value older adults’ experience through their creative engagement” (p. 2600). Gallistl (2021) further emphasized that investigating the importance of late-life creativity is not only valuable from a research point of view, but it can also help with future planning of meaningful and effective arts-based intervention for aging people. This is because empirical research can assist in “imagining arts-based interventions for older adults beyond the realm of quality of life and health, and instead encourages thinking about how a valuable artistic experience can be supported in older adults” with their own involvement in the process of “artistic co-production” (Gallistl, 2021, p. 2611).

In light of the value of late-life creativity, we argue that, in order to develop more comprehensive aging-friendly art-based interventions for older adults, it is necessary not just to make an effort to address issues surrounding aging but also to try to assist older adults in becoming more effective participants in collaborative co-creative process for designing these interventions, by utilizing the knowledge they have accumulated through their own aging. In this way, it would be possible to challenge ageism through collaborative – and particularly, inclusive and responsive – co-creation of artistic interventions (Rubin et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, however, there is still a lack of appreciation on the part of most cultural and artistic institutions – such as art galleries and museums, as well as funding agencies – who consider older adults as mainly the “passive” consumers rather than the “active” producers of art (Gallistl, Parisot, & Birke, 2019). Taking all findings of this study and those of related literature into consideration, we propose that the potential of older adults’ late-life creativity can be used as the basis for a framework to support collaborative co-creative approaches, not only in art-based interventions but also in artistic activities more broadly.

To be specific, such a framework would involve multiple stakeholders – including older adult participants, art practitioners and facilitators, local arts organizations, national and local governmental agencies, etc., and would consider a range of factors – for instance, artistic and aesthetic values, ethical concerns, evaluation measures, etc., to monitor, support and inspire each other systematically. A collaborative operation within a framework will ultimately lead to older adults harnessing their creativity, thereby contributing to their creative well-being and quality of life. Therefore, a co-creative framework would be geared toward sustaining and promoting older adults’ creativity and productive social engagement during their late years through their own creative expressions and insights. This would also acknowledge their contributions, both within their own art-based interventions and to the society at large, in efforts to combat ageism.

Conclusions

In this article, we examined diverse empirical perspectives on aging by analyzing the narratives we have gathered from qualitative life story interviews of older adults engaged in various community art-based interventions and other creative activities and social engagements. The study investigated these older adults’ aging experiences through their life courses by considering their different backgrounds and life contexts, as well as the value of different creative activities in which they take part. Based on our analysis, we identified two main themes dominating the narratives of our study participants – namely, components of creative well-being and aging and creativity.

According to Cohen (2000b):

it is creativity that empowers us, no matter what our demographic markers of gender, age, race, religion, income, or health status; and that enables us to participate in life as a journey of exploration, discovery, and self-expression. It can occur at any age and under any circumstances, but the richness of experience that age provides us magnifies the possibilities tremendously. The unique combination of creativity and life experience creates dynamic dimension of inner growth with age (as cited in Lowry, 2017, p. 6).

This study highlights that creative well-being for older adults can be realized by having a balance between practices of self-understanding and active engagement in later life (Reichstadt, Sengupta, Depp, Palinkas, & Jeste, 2010). As such, we propose that more attention is needed to focus on the importance of improving older adults’ late-life creativity through their engagement in social art-based interventions and creative activities. Therefore, the study underscores the development of more effective collaborative co-creative approaches, which focus not just on addressing aging-related issues but also on helping older people themselves become more active participants in the design of artistic activities.

While we recognize the limitations of our research data and analysis in terms of its geographical scope and inherent gender-bias, we nevertheless hope that our findings will generate more diverse inquiry to foster a better understanding of aging that responds to the needs of the growing diversity and complexity of aging populations, and ultimately contributes to efforts to combat ageism more broadly.

Statement of ethical approval

The study reported in this article has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee of Aalto University (reference D/206/03.04/2020). The study participants were provided with sufficient information on the purpose of the study in advance. Their participation in this study was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent.

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Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest to report.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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