Towards a Positive Psychology of Ageing: Potentials and Barriers

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This paper indicates how recent trends in the emerging science of positive psychology can be applied to the development of a positive psychology of ageing. Given that an increasing proportion of the clients of psychologists in the future will be older adults, it is important for clinical psychologists and other professionals working with older people to understand the potential, as well as the limitations, of older adults for development and responsiveness to interventions. Gerontology, the study of ageing, is an ideal field in which to explore the possibilities of positive psychology because relatively little work has been done to identify gains and areas of growth. Historically, the decrements of older age have been over-emphasised. It is argued that the reasons for this imbalance are both theoretical and methodological. It is easier to operationalise attributes in which older people perform more poorly than younger ones than those in which older people may excel. Furthermore, while psychology has emphasised the individual, older people’s strengths are more likely to be evident in the context of their social and physical environment. Empirical evidence is emerging that demonstrates the hitherto under-recognised skills, potentials, and contributions of older adults. The emerging science of positive psychology can contribute a great deal towards enabling the potential of older adults to be realised.

The aim of this paper is to indicate how recent trends in the emerging science of positive psychology can be applied to the development of a positive psychology of ageing. Evidence is emerging about the unrealised potentials of older adults in all domains, but changes in theoretical and methodological perspectives are required in order to demonstrate this adequately.

It is clear that the limits to a normal lifespan are a long way from being reached. The lifespan of laboratory rats bred over successive generations has increased remarkably, in some cases more than doubling, through manipulation of the environment. Given that the human life expectancy in developed nations has increased by more than half in the course of a century, the limits to mortality are still unknown, and it is possible that a normal lifespan may eventually exceed 120 years (Finch, 1997), possibly more, given the potential of current advances in genetic and medical technology. It is possible, given these trends, that people in their sixties contemplating retirement today may live another thirty or even fifty or more years post-retirement. The concept that almost half of one’s total life span is a period of decay does not intuitively make sense in this scenario.

Positive psychology, according to its founders and leading proponents Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), is “a science of positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions [which is concerned to identify] the factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish” (p. 5). Its aim is to expand the focus of scientific psychology beyond a perceived dominant preoccupation with pathology “to also building positive qualities” (p. 6), and has as its basic premise the viewpoint that human beings are “self-organising, self-directed, adaptive entities” (p. 8). Critics of positive psychology would argue that for many years there have been psychologists concerned with positive human development, such as Maslow (1969) and Rogers (1974). Perhaps the current interest in the newly named science of positive psychology is merely a contemporary manifestation of a stream that has existed at least since the time of Maslow and Rogers but that has been overshadowed by the cognitive paradigm that has dominated psychology for much of the last 20 years.

It is important to explore the possible applications of positive psychology to gerontology, the study of ageing, for three main reasons. First, older age has stereotypically been associated with losses and declines, and relatively little work has been done to identify gains and areas of growth. Secondly, if positive psychology can improve people’s mental and physical health, this will reduce dependency and therefore the costs of aged care in the future. Thirdly, given that an increasing proportion of the clients of psychologists in the future will be older adults, it is important for clinical psychologists and other professional working with older people to understand the potential, as well as the limitations, of older adults to respond to interventions designed to improve their level of functioning.

The thrust of this paper is consistent with Commonwealth Government policy on ageing. For instance, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care is in the process of formulating a National Strategy for an Ageing Australia (Bishop, 1999), part of which is to promote positive ageing, the attitude that “getting older is a positive experience for the majority of people” (p. 22). The present paper provides recent empirical evidence to demonstrate that positive ageing is not a desirable fantasy but a truer representation of the reality of ageing than the popular view of ageing as a time
of decline. This paper is also consistent with the position paper on psychology and ageing recently produced by the Australian Psychological Society (Gridley et al., 2000), one of the conclusions of which is that "ageism in service provision may result in underutilisation of psychological approaches" (p. 4). The present paper argues that ageism is based on false premises and that professional psychologists may need to be educated about the realities and potentials of their clients. The position paper recommends "that researchers in ageing and aged care examine their research questions and methods for ageist assumptions and stereotypes" (Gridley et al., p. 37), a topic addressed at the conclusion of the present paper.

Although gerontology is the study of ageing, it has been said that gerontology itself is very young. Unlike the study of infancy and childhood, "there is no long-standing tradition of a broadly based and refined 'culture' of old age", so the understanding of ageing is still in its formative stages and the field of gerontology is ripe for development and definition (P. Baltes & Graf, 1997, p. 429). Given that positive psychology is also a very youthful science, it is a good time to reconsider theories of ageing and to think creatively of new ways of approaching development in later life.

In recent decades, much work has been done to develop the concept of successful ageing, which on the face of it is a positive term. However, successful ageing as it has been conceptualised to date is not necessarily equivalent to positive ageing. While there are many possible definitions, a common current understanding of successful ageing is that it is a process of successful adaptation to age-related changes (P. Baltes & M. Baltes, 1990), adaptation consisting of the ability to effectively adjust to changes (P. Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1996; King, Seltzer, & Ryff, 1997; Myers & Diener, 1995; Strongman & Overton, 1999).

It has been proposed that successful ageing can be achieved by selective optimisation with compensation, a principle developed by Paul Baltes and his associates (P. Baltes & M. Baltes, 1990; P. Baltes et al., 1996; Lang & Carstensen, 1994) into a strategy of largely psychological responses to age-related events. In their conceptualisation, selection is choosing to do what is possible given the constraints of increasing age, which may mean a change of activities; optimisation refers to engaging in behaviours designed to carry out the selected activity as well as possible; and compensation refers to either an overt behavioural or an inner psychological response to a loss or reduction in the ability to pass across the synapses between neurones. Compensatory responses can range from the technological, such as getting a hearing aid or wheelchair, to the most subtle inner responses, such as re-valuing previously important goals.

Elements of selective optimisation with compensation are conceptually similar to, with subtle but important differences from, elements of other conceptualisations of adaptation to age-related changes, such as the stress and coping theory of Folkman and Lazarus (in which problem-focused coping refers to manifest external responses, whereas emotion-focused coping refers to psychological reorientation; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986), Brandstädter's theory of tenacious goal pursuit (overt response) and flexible goal adjustment (psychological reorientation) (Brandstädter & Renner, 1990), and Heckhausen's theory of primary (overt response) and secondary control (psychological reorientation) (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993). Selective optimisation has been used as a guiding principle by researchers from numerous domains of development, including social interaction (Lang & Carstensen, 1994), cognitive competence (P. Baltes et al., 1996; Salthouse & Maurer, 1996), maintenance of autonomy (M. Baltes, Neumann, & Zank, 1994), and adjusting to bereavement (Wortman & Silver, 1990). While it provides a useful framework for the study of adjusting to changes, it has been criticised on theoretical grounds for implying that the so-called compensatory responses are direct consequences of age-related losses and declines (Uttal & Perlmutter, 1989).

(Nota that Uttal and Perlmutter based their criticism on the earlier writings of P. Baltes (e.g., 1987), whereas the theory of selective optimisation with compensation was more fully expressed in P. Baltes and M. Baltes (1990), a year after Uttal and Perlmutter's article. However, Uttal and Perlmutter's criticisms were still relevant since the Baltes's had not changed their interpretation of Salthouse's study in the intervening three years (see later).

According to Uttal and Perlmutter (1989), there are four possible relationships between gains and losses: unrelated phenomena (the so-called response being to something other than the loss), spurious phenomena (both losses and the so-called gains being caused by a third factor), compensation (the loss causing the gain, as in the model of P. Baltes & M. Baltes (1990), and suppression (the so-called gain emerging through another cause and leading to the decline in the other function).

The example most commonly cited to illustrate selective optimisation with compensation is that of the expert typist. Salthouse (1984) demonstrated that older typists, who had slower reaction times and manipulation speed on the keys, were able to maintain typing speeds as fast as those of younger typists by having the ability to scan a greater amount of upcoming material, thereby needing to look less often at the work to be copied. P. Baltes and M. Baltes (1990) interpreted this to indicate that the older typists developed compensatory strategies in response to reduced cognitive speed and manual dexterity. However, Uttal and Perlmutter (1989) maintained that other explanations were possible. For instance, it may be a suppression effect: with increasing expertise, older typists develop effective heuristics and strategies, such as increasing span, that make their work easier. Therefore, it is not necessary to have such a quick reaction time in order to perform the work efficiently, and this skill can be allowed to decay without consequences for performance. The two phenomena may also have separate origins. For instance, cognitive slowing could have its origin in an increased time for neurotransmitters to pass across the synapses between neurones (decreased speed of processing, according to Salthouse, 1991) whereas increased expertise may be a result of an increasing numbers of connections between neurones with age (Finch, 1997).

Uttal and Perlmutter's (1989) critique of the Baltes's (1990) interpretation of the typist study illustrates that the implicit basis underlying the work of even some theorists of successful ageing is that older age is a time of decline and that the best that can be done is to make the most of what is left of one's abilities, and to minimise further decline. As Belsky (1999) put it, "even researchers interested in successful ageing often couch their studies in terms of how people manage to stay the same, not the extent to which they evolve or grow" (p. 20). Uttal and Perlmutter's (1989) analysis draws attention to unexplored paradigms of ageing, apart from the compensation for loss paradigm, that may be missed by focusing on only one quarter of the picture.

In recent years, a growing research emphasis on the positive gains associated with ageing has emerged (e.g., Dittrman-Kohli, 1990; Strongman & Overton, 1999; other references cited later). Admittedly, the discussion of gains and losses is a theoretical minefield, since the labelling of a phenomenon as a gain or a loss is value-laden.
Another issue is the size of the value to assign to any particular loss or gain, since a single gain (such as peace of mind) may outweigh a number of losses (such as physical health and independence). There is not space in the present article to discuss these issues in detail, since they necessarily involve other issues, including methodological ones such as whether to use quantitative or qualitative measures. In the following section, gains and losses that are reasonably well accepted will be mentioned in the discussion of whether losses outweigh gains in older age. The following section describes some recent evidence of growth in what have been previously been considered to be declining functions.

The older years have traditionally been regarded as a time of physical decline. However, with appropriate training, older people can improve their strength, balance, and flexibility. For instance, Damush and Damush (1999) have shown that strength training improves the strength and health-related quality of life of older women. In their study, 62 women aged between 59 and 84 years demonstrated significantly greater muscular strength after only 8 weeks of resistance training with elastic bands. Even people in their 80s and 90s who have not exercised for many years can build up their muscle strength by pumping iron in an age-friendly way. This has implications for morbidity and mortality. In a 20-year study of men aged initially from 40 to 60 years, Eriksson et al. (1998) showed that even small improvements in physical fitness were associated with significantly lower mortality. McMurdo (2000) found that regular moderate exercise for about 30 minutes on most days was enough to rejuvenate physical capacity by 10 to 15 years. He claims that ageing in itself does not cause disease, and states that “finally laying to rest the pervasive misconception that all the ills of old age are ‘just your age’ won’t represent a major breakthrough for health care of older people” (p. 1149). This form of ageism has repercussions in other realms as well. For instance, employers perceive that older workers are more prone to illness and injury, and workplace injuries are often a means to get rid of older workers (Remenyi, 1994). However, it has recently been shown that the likelihood that injured older workers can be rehabilitated is as great as for younger workers (Jacobs, 1997).

There is a growing literature linking attitudes and states of mind to physical wellbeing in older adults. Physical activity, social interaction, cognitive function, and physical and mental health are inextricably linked in very complex ways. It will be a challenge for researchers in positive psychology to tease out the nature of the reciprocal influences. Some exciting indicators of the nature of these relationships are beginning to emerge. For instance, it is now a well-accepted fact that subjective self-ratings of health (e.g., “What would you say your health is like these days?”), with possible responses ranging from terrible to excellent) are better predictors of morbidity and mortality than physical health assessments by physicians or pathology tests (Helmer, Barberger-Gateau, Letenreur, & Dartigues, 1999; Menec, Chipperfield, & Perry, 1999). Furthermore, having a positive mood and engaging in enjoyable activities, even if not physically demanding, are more strongly related to self-rated health than are functional ability and medical indicators (Benyamini, Idler, Leventhal, & Leventhal, 2000). In a recent experiment, Levy, Hausdorff, Hencke, and Wei (2000), using a subliminal priming technique on 29 women and 25 men (age range 62 to 82 years), showed that hearing positive stereotypical words associated with ageing (such as wise, sage, and insightful) significantly reduced the cardiovascular stress resulting from a cognitive challenge test, whereas negative stereotypical words such as dependent, forgets, and incompetent had the opposite effect. Also, Vaillant (2000) described evidence from a longitudinal study that showed that men who were in good physical health at age 50 and who had positive qualities of mind such as altruism and a good sense of humour were more likely to be physically healthy at age 65 than men who were low on these qualities. As a final example, it has been reported that people with coronary artery disease who displayed anger were more at risk of their condition progressing than those who did not (Reuters Health, 2000). It is not possible to definitely assert from these studies that positive thinking influences physical health rather than the other way round, but the evidence is increasing that physical health can improve in older age, and furthermore that psychological health can influence physical health.

One undesirable effect of negative attitudes to ageing has been the trend to what has been called “pseudo-retirement” (Encel, 1995) or “premature retirement” (Ranzijn & Hall, 1999), which refers to ceasing from paid employment before the employees want or need to. Apart from a tragic loss of social capital resulting from the removal of highly skilled workers from the workforce, loss of meaningful employment can have devastating psychological effects, such as loss of self-esteem and increases in mental illness and alcoholism (Gallo, Bradley, Siegel, & Kasl, 2000, 2001). Premature retirement can be particularly devastating to people in their forties or fifties, who may face 30 or more years unable to find meaningful employment ever again (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999).

Some of the prevailing stereotypes about older workers are that they are incompetent, unproductive, slow, cranky, frail, and unable to learn (Gething, 1999; Salthouse & Maurer, 1996), but these stereotypes are, without exception, erroneous (Remenyi, 1994). There is no established relationship between chronological age and job performance (Saks & Waldman, 1998; Salthouse & Maurer, 1996). Accompanying the increase in healthy life expectancy (defined as years lived without functional impairment, which is now estimated to be 73.2 years for Australians; Mathers, Sadana, Salomon, Murray, & Lopez, 2001) has been an increase in the proportion of older people who are able to work for longer than ever before (Crimmins, Reynolds, & Saito, 1999). It is reported that there are increasing numbers of people in their nineties who are continuing to work with enthusiasm and high productivity (Hoffman, 2000). Older workers are just as trainable as younger workers, including in the use of computers (Czaja, 1996). Indeed, it has been said that the shortage of older workers with information technology skills is holding back the development of the IT industry itself, since older workers are more likely to know which strategies will work and which will not (McMurchie, 1999). Some employers are starting to see the wisdom of encouraging more older workers back into the workforce, especially in professions that require good interpersonal skills (Nicholson, 1999), since it is becoming increasingly clear that much of the profitability of companies is due to its stock of human capital, much of which is possessed by older workers (Fruin, 1997; Greenspan, 2000).

The issue of the trainable character of older people has received more attention of late. P. Baltes et al. (1996) claimed that, while there is reserve cognitive capacity at all ages, older people cannot improve with training as much as younger people. However, Schooler, Mulatu, and Oates (1999) showed that older workers demonstrated a greater gain in intellectual functioning after doing substantively complex work than younger workers, whereas tasks that demonstrate the superiority of younger people are characteristically more simple. Perhaps the contradiction in research findings is a result of different ways of operationalising cognitive
performance. Much of the research in which people are trained in, and then practise, a cognitive task again and again until they can improve no longer (a technique referred to by P. Baltes et al., 1996, as "testing-the-limits") has used tasks of low ecological validity to operationalise cognition. In their study of older workers, Schooler et al. (1998) used tasks that were interesting and inherently rewarding to older workers, the tasks being characterised by the need for "independent judgement and making decisions involving ill-defined or apparently contradictory contingencies" (p. 485). These attributes are some of the characteristics of what has been called post-formal thought (Labouvie-Vief & Hakim-Larson, 1989; Sinnott, 1984), a postulated stage of cognitive development thought to be attained in adulthood. Some of the other putative characteristics of post-formal thought are openness to complexity and the ability to deal with uncertainty, inconsistency, contradiction, imperfection, and compromise. Given their greater life experience, including exposures to many such situations in which there has been no single clear-cut solution, older workers (and indeed older people in general) would be expected on the basis of this theory to perform better than younger people on such tasks.

Many attempts have been made by cognitive neuropsychologists to demonstrate areas of cognitive performance in which older people are superior to younger, so far without apparent success (P. Baltes et al., 1996; Hultsch, Hertzog, Small, & Dixon, 1999). Hultsch et al. stated that the evidence, even from their own study, for the postulated effect of intellectually challenging activities on reducing cognitive decline was not very compelling. However, most of their measures of cognition consisted of the fairly simple measures that have been used by cognitive psychologists for many years (such as fact recall and forward and backward word and digit recall) and which almost invariably favour younger people. If the cognition of older people is qualitatively different from that of younger people, as Sinnott (1984) proposed, it follows that qualitatively different tests will be required to demonstrate this.

Wisdom is one aspect of cognition in which older people are anecdotally thought to be superior to younger people. The attainment of wisdom is often listed as a potential gain of older age. In the research reported by P. Baltes and Staudinger (2000), the criteria for wisdom included "rich factual and procedural knowledge, lifespan contextualism, relativism of values and life priorities, and recognition and management of uncertainty" (p. 122), qualities very similar to those of postformal thought (Sinnott, 1984). Given that these qualities, almost by definition, should be possessed more by older than younger people (since increasing age brings an increase in knowledge and experiences), it is puzzling that P. Baltes and Staudinger (2000) reported no effect of age. However, the authors themselves express doubts about the ecological validity of their measures, which largely consisted of responses to hypothetical scenarios, whereas wisdom is normally tested in a real situation, in which the inputs consist of the person's knowledge of the relevant facts and the situational context prevailing at that point in time. A wise decision at one point in time may be the wrong decision at another. There are other theories of wisdom, which conceptualise it as including attributes such as contentment, compassion, concern for people, integrity, and honesty as well as cognitive problem-solving skills (Haste, Helkama, & Markoulis, 1998), attributes that are even more difficult to operationalise than the cognitive constructs.

If there are gains associated with ageing, they are likely to be complex and ill-defined constructs such as these. Perhaps one reason why, to date, more losses have been identified than gains is because the losses (e.g., physical health and function, bereavement, speed of processing) are much easier to measure than the gains. One of the greatest challenges for positive psychology of ageing will be to operationalise postulated gains in a way that has ecological and construct validity that is relevant to, and accepted by, older people themselves, as are more obvious gains such as increased free time and the satisfaction of having raised a family and achieved worthwhile goals. As Vaillant (2000) stated, "most facets of human behaviour— for example, creativity, maturity, and empathy—are extraordinarily difficult to measure" (p. 89). Surely, that makes the challenge more necessary, since these ill-defined constructs may be among the most important factors in social wellbeing.

To summarise the argument so far, an increasing body of evidence indicates that there is much unrealised potential among older people in the domains of physical health and function, employment, and cognition. What are some other possible gains associated with ageing? According to Strongman and Overton (1999), one of the strengths of older people is an increased ability to regulate their emotions, leading to contentment and acceptance of life. One of the most robust findings about older people is their higher level of life satisfaction compared to younger and middle-aged people. Other possible benefits include increasing freedom from financial, professional, and family responsibilities; an expanding store of memories, experiences, and competencies; and an enhanced appreciation of the complexity and beauty of human existence (Dittman-Kohli, 1990; Ikels et al., 1992; Lawton et al., 1999; Strongman & Overton, 1999; Van Tilburg, 1998). Some particular strengths of older adults are a result of having lived a long life and observed events and changes in the world. Because of their increased appreciation of the fragility and beauty of life, older people have the potential to be better citizens and conservationists than younger people. Indeed, older people often demonstrate a passionate involvement in the lives of their families and communities, a passion that belies the appearance of what may appear to be a frail body (Ranzijn & Gribich, 2001).

The field of psychogerontology is characterised by conflicting opinions about the capacities, competencies, and potentials of older people (P. Baltes et al., 1996; Berg, 1996; George & Clipp, 1991; Giambra, Camp, & Grodsky, 1992; Hultsch et al., 1999; Leonard & Burns, 1999; Rapkin & Fischer, 1992; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Perhaps this is due in part to another methodological factor, namely, an over-emphasis on the individual in isolation rather than on the capacities, competencies, and potentials of people in their overall context. Indeed, one consistent criticism of psychology over the last 30 years has been its lack of regard for context (P. Baltes et al., 1996; Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Labouvie-Vief & Chandler, 1978; Riegel, 1976; Sanson & Dudgeon, 2000; Thomas & Chambers, 1989; Verhaegen, Geraerts, & Marcoen, 2000). The emphasis on the individual may have contributed to the low ecological validity of instruments developed to measure individual attributes, since many attributes are expressed in social situations. The general finding that older adults show deficits in almost all functions may then be an artefact of measurement rather than an expression of true potentials. Lawton (1989, 1991; Lawton, deVoe, & Parmelee, 1995) worked in the later part of his life to develop a holistic theory of the person-in-the-environment, according to which what is important is not a collection of individual attributes but rather the extent to which there is a match or congruence (Lawton labelled this the "fit") between the needs and talents of the individual and the demands and
characteristics of the environment. Lawton’s person-fit model was developed from the adaptation-level theory of Harry Helson (1964) and the environmental press theory of Murray (1938), which were starting to become influential in the 1960s. However, the interest in these theories became lost to a large extent in the development of the cognitive paradigm that dominated psychology for the latter part of the 20th century. Cognitive psychology, even cognitive social psychology, is very much focused on the individual. Cognitive social psychology examines social interactions from the individual, rather than a dialectical or transactional, perspective.

According to Lawton (1991), competency consists of the ability to effectively adapt to the environment. If the environmental press exceeds the ability to adapt, the person will be seen as incompetent. It logically follows that if a person is judged as incompetent, the problem may not be in the person but rather in the features of the environment or in the dynamics of the transactions between the person and the environment. Hence, in order to validly assess competencies, it is necessary to first identify the structural and societal constraints that act to suppress the older person’s capabilities, then work out what is modifiable, alter the environment if required, and finally assess competencies in ways that are ecologically valid and meaningful for the individual.

Older people, by virtue of their longevity, are survivors who have overcome tremendous obstacles because of their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. They are experts in living. However, their skills are devalued in the current emphasis on the virtues of youth, which is one of the causes of that species of ageism that devalues the worth of older people. The structures and attitudes of many sectors of society have not caught up with the reality of ageing, which is that, with relatively few exceptions (mostly towards the very end of life), older people are vital, self-reliant, and creatively involved with their communities. Recent research is demonstrating that, far from being frail and dependent, older people in many cases are the mainstays of their communities and are supporting younger generations rather than needing to be supported (Ranzijn & Andrews, 1999). More can be done, through education and changes in policy, to break down the barriers and stereotypes that prevent older adults from achieving their full potential. Psychology can have a leading role to play in bringing about the required change in perspective, since one of the strengths of psychology is its focus on enabling psychological reorientation.

The current approach for professionals working with older clients, including clinical psychologists, neuropsychologists, counsellors, and health and aged-care professionals, tends to focus on compensating for the deficits rather than bringing out the strengths of older people (Gridley et al., 2000). A major paradigm shift in orientation is required, mirroring the shift in attitudes of psychologists in general that is proposed by the emerging leaders of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Further research into the positive psychology of ageing can help to bring about this paradigm shift.

There is a lack of appropriate knowledge among clinical psychologists and other professionals about the ageing process and appropriate methods for working with older clients (Helmes & Gee, 2000). Another barrier is the ageist attitude that older people are unable to benefit from psychological treatment because the problems with which older people often present (e.g., sleeping disorders and problems with memory) are regarded as aspects of normal ageing and therefore untreatable (Ferguson & Koder, 1998; Gridley et al., 2000). Professionals working with older people need to overcome their own ageist attitudes if they are to effectively assist what will be an increasingly larger proportion of their clientele (Helmes & Gee, 2000). Fortunately, an increasing number of books on the psychology of ageing and on interventions with older adults are being produced (e.g., Abeles et al., 1998; Belsky, 1999; Hersen & Van Hasselt, 1996; book review in Gatz, 2000). However, there is, in Australia at present, a serious deficiency in training programs in clinical geropsychology. The only institution offering professional training in this specialisation is Edith Cowan University, and even there, geropsychology is only one part of the clinical psychology program (Helmes & Gee, 2000).

In summary, the argument for developing a positive psychology of ageing is as follows:

- There has been a historical over-emphasis on the decrements of older age to the neglect of identifying the positive benefits that accompany getting older.
- It is easier to measure attributes in which older people perform more poorly than younger ones than attributes on which older people excel. The former are easier to define and operationalise than the latter.
- Psychology has over-emphasised the measurement of the individual in isolation, whereas the qualities in which older people may excel are those more likely to be expressed as interactions with their environment.
- Empirical evidence is emerging that demonstrates the hitherto under-recognised skills, potentials, and contributions of older adults.
- Identifying and removing environmental constraints, including negative ageist stereotypes and lack of knowledge, will do a great deal towards enabling the potential of older adults to be expressed.

References


