

Productive Contributors and Neo-Liberal Politics: a New Perspective of Ageing in Australia

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Abstract

This paper, which takes the form of a scoping study, aims to provide new interpretations of ageing in Australia, not by looking at the elderly as non-reciprocal burdens on society, a future debt for the young generation, “job lots” or a threat to the economy, but as a productive, valuable and contributing demographic. We attempt to explicate the social value of the elderly and to provide new evaluations that will encourage society to value rather than disvalue those who can claim and enjoy longevity. We explore how respective collective habits, i.e., culturally conditioned systems of dispositions and distinctions, moral principles and perceptions of propriety influence the perceptions of the younger cohort vis-à-vis the elderly, and to what degree socio-political attitudes and programs fuel stigmatization of the aged. Finally, we stress that social inclusion is vital to the ageing population’s physical and psychological wellbeing.

Key words: ageism, cognition, stereotype threat, institutionalized care, successful aging

Introduction

Being human starts with having one’s roots in individual habitus. Each individual’s *habitus* generates strategies that form the basis of the ways in which said individual engages with life. Bourdieu argues that the habitus of individuals exposed to the same fields and the same ‘logic of action’ over an extended period of time gives rise to a ‘class habitus’ which enables practices to be objectively harmonized without any direct intervention or explicit co-ordination (Bourdieu, 1990). “Ageing and age groups are demarcated not only by economic and political practices, but also by specific lifestyles, a cultural *habitus*, and by dispositions which differentiate them from other, competing social groups” (Turner, 1989, p.590, emphasis added).

Often, when contemplating ‘the problem’ of a nation’s elderly, questions arise such as: ‘What is the purpose of human life and, more particularly, of old age?’ Perhaps, more accurately, one should ask: ‘Why is old age?’ What does it contribute, either to the individual or to society? What is its meaning? Each individual, at some stage or another, is motivated to seek and find personal meaning in existence. In fact, ‘part of what it means to be human is to wonder about what it means to be human’ (Reker and Wong, p.22, citing Baird, 1985: 117). The question could arise: does the fact that many of the elderly feel no longer able to compete automatically label them as ‘non-productive’, as objects of declining social and economic reciprocity? As Turner observes: “Both young and elderly social groups in a period of economic recession are perceived to be socially dependent, and become the targets of ‘the politics of resentment’” (Turner, 1989: 588).

Bengtson (1975), who investigated the global value orientations of humanism/materialism and collective/individualism across grandparent-parent-youth lineages and within families, found the following: generational differences in collectivism/individualism but not in humanism/materialism. Grand children endorsed values of individualism (skill, an exciting life, personal freedom, sense of accomplishment); and grandparents endorsed greater collectivism (religious participation, loyalty, patriotism, friendship).

However, large within-generation variation was also found, obscuring clear interpretation of between generation differences. When value orientations were examined within families, some evidence of family transmission emerged on the collective-individualism dimension, but the effect was minimal (Reker and Wong, 1988: 224). As the ageing population figures continually increase in the 21st century, Ageism has become one of dominant issues in the socio-political arena (Palmore, 1998). As Minichiello (et al., 2000: 253) point out: "Ageism is a set of social relations that discriminate against older people and set them apart as being different by defining and understanding them in an oversimplified, generalised way". If current public attitudes persist, Kenyon (1992) claims, all of us will encounter ageism if we live long enough. Since the term 'ageism' was coined by Robert Butler in 1969, many studies related to ageism have generally examined how the attitudes and beliefs of younger people contribute to denying older people opportunities and equitable treatment (Minichiello, et al., 2000). For example, Giles and colleagues (1992) discovered how young people process and respond to the speech of older people in stereotypical ways. Ryan and colleagues (1995) show how younger people at an interactional level use patronising verbal and nonverbal communication towards older carers. Sawchuk (1995), who examined advertising campaigns and other marketing strategies, concludes that at a public level, many marketing discourses perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotypes of old age.

As several studies have consistently found, older workers often face ageist stereotypes - and themselves - as increasingly marginal in the workforce (Maule *et al.*, 1996). And, older workers seem to figure in employers' interest in 'downsizing' their workforce (Encel, 1995). The most significant barriers are managerial biases that older workers are too costly, too inflexible and too difficult to train (Imel, 1996). Such findings are emerging not only from Western countries but also from former communist states. Based on interviews with older women from St Petersburg, Gerasimova (1996) found that the major difficulties were age-discriminatory social policy and gerontophobic stereotypes. Some studies have researched how older people may recognise and give meaning to the phenomenon of 'ageism' (Cremmin, 1992). Based on their research into Australia's elderly, Minichiello and colleagues (2000: 253) conclude as follows:

Informants recognise that older people as a group experience negative treatment in terms of poor access to transport and housing, low incomes, forced retirement and inadequate nursing home care. While few have experienced overt or brutal ageism, interaction in everyday life involves some negative treatment, occasional positive 'ageism', and others 'keeping watch' for one's vulnerabilities. Health professionals are a major source of ageist treatment. Some older people limit their lives by accommodating ageism, while others actively negotiate new images of ageing for themselves and those who will be old in the future.

In terms of challenging Ageism, we argue that it is necessary to have positive images or perceptions of ageing groups in society, which may gradually change people's perceptions, attitudes and government policies towards the ageing population. However, because few studies have been conducted in this area to date, a negative image of the elderly continues to be dominant in many social and public policy debates. In this paper, Australian politics and government policy vis-à-vis age-related issues will be discussed. Also, we aim to prove that the elderly can - and still do - make positive contributions to our society, rather than being a 'burden', a label frequently assigned to them. Finally, some suggestions will be made that will help the elderly to continue to make a positive contribution.

Australia's Ageing and Neo-Liberal Politics

It would seem that in Australia, particularly under neo-liberal governments, the perceived 'problem' of the country's 'greying population' has given rise to a pejorative vocabulary that demeans the aged, unlike in some countries wherein the elderly are still regarded as repositories of wisdom and highly worthy of respect and inclusion. One frequently hears comments to the effect that some elderly 'talk endlessly'. In times when not every household had a telephone, talking was the general (and inclusive) means of communication, a ritual of cohesion unlike the exclusive practice of staring into myopia-inducing hand held devices that prevails in today's high-tech driven society. Today in Australia, life expectancy among the majority of non-indigenous populations is increasing¹. As of 2014, life expectancy reached 80.3 and 84.4 years for Australian men and women respectively. There are only six other countries worldwide where both men and women have a life expectancy of over 80 years, namely Japan, Italy, Switzerland, Iceland, Israel and Sweden (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

¹In 2010-12, the average life expectancy of Indigenous people was approximately ten years (10.6 years for men and 9.5 years for women) less than that of non-Indigenous Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

According to official estimation, between 2010 and 2050, the number of people aged from 65 to 84 is expected to double, and the number of those aged 85 and older will quadruple (Australian Government, 2014). In contrast, the number of people of traditional 'working age' to support each person over the age of 65 will decline from five in 2010 to just under three in 2050 (Australian Government, 2014). But this means that while they can expect to experience a longer period of post-employment leisure, this time of their lives is often one of economic inactivity which, by extension, will bring different patterns of consumption and public spending. "The major fiscal implications of this future situation relate to the public provision of health care and social security pensions" (O'Brien, 2004: 7). The Australian government (2014) further points out that longer life expectancy is a cause for the current pressures on social security, which render welfare payments no longer sustainable. Government focus is upon the economic 'burden' that older people are said to represent both to the country's economy and, in particular, to the country's working population. Neo-liberal political ideology has distorted and amplified the macro-economic consequences of population ageing in order to legitimate anti-welfare state policies (Walker, 1990). According to Stratton, in Australia, neo-liberalism was made personal in the sense that it progressively undermined the idea that the state had a responsibility to all who lived within its borders, replacing this with the claim that there is a reciprocal relationship founded ultimately upon the market, between the state and the people who live in it. In effect, it is the market sing of Australian society (Stratton, 2011). A positive term coined by the German Freiberg School, neo-Liberalism 'has transformed over time into a negative term associated with radical economic reform.

Among Australia's perceived elderly are the country's 'grey nomads', often early retirees who have bought campervans and taken to the roads to explore Australia's grand and varied countryside. They too are being targeted for 'taking up space' on roads which should be the province' of trucking companies. And, in addition, the elderly are considered to drive dangerously, evident in the recent comment made by a senior police official in Victoria who suggested that drivers over the age of 70 should reconsider their use of the roads². At the same time, members of the same age group are being encouraged to work longer, e.g., continue to contribute. But, an inferred proviso is that they either walk to work or utilise public transport as they can no longer be considered sufficiently alert to drive safely.

Another activity that attracts caustic comment – frequently from the political sphere or radio discussion programs - is the elderly frequenting of clubs and pubs. What they consider a 'nice day out' in venues at which they can either interact socially or not if preferred, where they can experience bright lights and music, or simply sit and read a newspaper is often condemned as 'wasting the taxpayers' money', most heinously on poker machines. Conversely, the millions spent on horse racing, e.g., gambling on the annual Melbourne Cup, for example, seem almost rejoiced in rather than condemned. Whatever their chosen form of recreation, scant thought seems offered the fact that often these same elderly worked very hard during their lifetimes, paid their taxes, raised their children unaided by government support, suffered and/or coped with life's vicissitudes, fought in various world conflicts, and have *earned the right* to enjoy their retirement. In effect, these people are disengaging:

In so-called disengagement theories, it is argued that with ageing, people begin to relinquish certain social responsibilities and expectations in order to engage more fully in personally rewarding leisure activities. As the elderly withdraw from social roles, society as it were, disengages from the ageing in order to bring about a neutral process of declining reciprocity (Turner, 1989: 597).

If social interaction is built around reciprocity, do the elderly reciprocate, how do they reciprocate, or do they endlessly 'take'? Are they victims of stereotyping? How should they be categorized in the overall social scenario? The varying opinions voiced in the debate give rise to questions vis-à-vis categorization and social stereotyping, two terms that need to be clearly distinguished given their separate meanings. As Pickering argues: "They are not synonyms for each other...to see them as equivalent obscures the distinctive properties of stereotyping" (Pickering, 2001: 2). Pickering further argues that because categories are not fixed for all time, "they should not be regarded as *the* elemental structure of thought" (p.3, original emphasis). According to Pickering (2001:3): Stereotyping may operate as a way of imposing a sense of order on the social world in the same way as categories, but with the crucial difference that stereotyping attempts to deny any flexible thinking with categories. It denies this in the interests of the structures of power which it upholds.

² It would be interesting to see statistics (if any) re the number of elderly apprehended for driving under the influence of 'ice', talking into mobile phones or text messaging while driving.

The comfort of inflexibility which stereotypes provide reinforces the conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed. In a world that is constantly changing, we are confronted all the time with certain social events, circumstances and developments which show that this is not the case. When we remember this, when we recognise that what appears to be fixed in place can be modified or altered, as the world changes, we are confronted by the dilemma underlying the impulse to resort to the imprecise referencing of stereotypical attribution. We can then move either way.

In Australia today, there is evidence not only of stereotyping of the elderly as a non-reciprocal 'job lot', e.g., drain on the economy and financial burden on future generations, but of stigmatization of this group, both by some of those in power and elements of the general public. As a group, they are required to leave behind their particular affiliations/histories in the general interest of the public good. Stigma, by demarcating boundaries and limits, could be seen to go hand-in-hand with 'Bothering', a cultural process that reifies socio-cultural distinctions. Recently, DrDry land heard a young man say: 'I don't know how to speak to old people'³. To the listener, the impact of his statement generated from the former's perception that the young man viewed the elderly as Others, as a 'category' of others-who-cannot-be known.⁴ This also gives rise to questions vis-à-vis family life in Australia today; that is, of how much time young people spend with their grandparents and older relatives, and the degree and quality of their listening/talking time. Also, of the value placed upon the contribution made by the elderly. Often today, for various reasons, elderly parents are committed to Nursing Home care, possibly limiting the one-on-one time a grandchild spends with her/his grandparent/s on occasional visits.

The average age of Australians is increasing as a result of declining birth-rates and increased life expectancy. But, the reality is that elderly people in Australia today are more likely to end their days in nursing homes (variously referred to as Aged Care Facilities) than with their offspring or in their own homes. Irrespective of ideology, successive governments, rather than incessantly proclaiming the cost of the elderly and the prospective burden on the younger generations should instead focus upon nursing home practices, e.g., reported profiteering by nursing care providers (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2016a). According to this report, while providers are claiming increased funding, they are spending less time with needy residents. Tom Allard (2015) states that "...one in eight claims audited by the government last financial year were incorrect, leading to an unexpected \$150-million blow-out in the aged care budget". So why, given their general – if sometimes selective - proclivity to publicize perceived roting (for example, perceived false disability pension claims, politicians' 'entitlement' claims), cannot government ministers switch their stigmatization of the elderly to exposure of the practices that render elderly health care exorbitant. In addition, seemingly overlooked is the fact that living in a nursing home is not always an enjoyable experience. Nursing homes are common settings for abuse, with evidence that lack of staffing and lack of supervision is leading to an increase in violence between residents (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2016b). Some nursing homes may be staffed by only one or two people on certain shifts.

A staff survey by the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association found three quarters of workers viewed understaffing as a factor increasing the risk of abuse in their workplace. The Association's professional officer Helen Mickiewicz said that many staff would not report abuse or neglect, as they feared reprisals such as losing shifts (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2016b). A parliamentary enquiry heard that an estimated 50,000 NSW seniors have experienced some form of violence, exploitation or neglect most often by a trusted family member. Irrespective of who inflicts the abuse, this is not only a sad indictment against Australian society in general, but also against the standard of nursing care. The establishment of the NSW Elder Abuse Helpline is further evidence of the lack of compassion for Australia's elderly. And, apart from these vicissitudes, the elderly are endlessly stigmatised by government as 'a threat to the economy and a financial burden for future generations'. When the Abbott coalition government assumed power in 2013, a decision was taken to include aged care and ageing into the Social Services portfolio.

³ Linguistic strategies have an important role to play in nursing home care (Aged care). Backhaus refers to the following strategies: 'Dependency-inducing talk', e.g., staff members intentional or non-intentional emphasis on frailty and helplessness of the elderly; Secondary baby-talk (SBT) and patronising communication; and, use of 'controlling' language (e.g., ought, must, should). As well, there is first name usage and exaggerated praise. For further reading, see Backhaus, Peter, Politeness in institutional elderly care in Japan; A cross cultural comparison, *Journal of Politeness Research* 5, 2009, 53-71.

⁴ Further evidence of the attitude towards ageing among some of the youthful cohort can be detected in 'pop' music over the years. For example, the Beatles' 'When I'm 64' and the Who's 'I hope I die before I get old'.

“At a time when Australia’s policy approach to longevity and ageing needs to be front and centre of any government agenda, the Coalition has thrown ageing into a portfolio more accurately described as the Department of Odds and Ends (along with energy, financial services and tourism, among others)” (Millane, 2013). This seemed somewhat curious given that PM Abbott was Minister for Health and Ageing in the Howard government (2003-2007). It would be reasonable to assume that his former experience of the aged would prompt him to ensure their care under his Prime Ministership. We note that the Gillard government appointed a Minister for Ageing. As far as overall tenures are concerned (the length of which could determine each Minister’s interest in and – more importantly - comprehension of problems associated with the aged), Labour’s Peter Staples held the portfolio for the longest period of time, i.e., five years and sixty-four days. The Coalition tenures have ranged from 79 days to three years and thirty-six days (Hon. Bronwyn Bishop)⁵. The current Malcolm Turnbull government transferred the Aged Care portfolio to the Department of Health in October 2015. Irrespective of who is responsible for the aged and aged care, the conversation inevitably links the aged with ‘the economy’ or, more specifically, as a ‘burden on the economy and on future generations’.

Today in Australia, the government is planning to extend the pension age from 65 in 2016 to 70 in 2035 (Australian Government, 2014). At the same time, older people are being encouraged to remain active in the workforce. However, the problem confronting the Australian government today is how to ensure: (a) that the elderly are welcomed into the workforce; and, (b) that their value is enhanced rather than underestimated⁶. Apropos of remaining in the work force, much will depend upon how old the person feels, with which age group he/she identifies, and whether the individual sees and experiences ageing positively or negatively. As well, much will depend upon the response (if any) of the employer advertising and interviewing for a position. There may well need to be a rethinking on the part of employers. In today’s work environment, jobs are often advertised on line. A date of birth is required and if not provided, the application will not proceed. Invariably the interviewer will be (often considerably) younger than the applicant. Much will depend upon the open-mindedness of the interviewer and the flexibility of the workplace.

An older person may well bring quality and experience to the role: there is no suggested theory that the competitive spirit slows with age. Many among the aged cohort are quite capable of retuning their IT skills. Younger managers can pass on latest technology developments; and older employees can pass on ‘soft skills’. In this way, reverse mentoring can occur (ABC radio, 2016). But, here attention should be also given to the factors (including age) that disqualify some elderly from participating in the workforce. Prominent among these is macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness and major vision loss in Australia. ‘Prevalence increases with age. Over 14% of people over 80 (123,000) have vision loss or blindness from Age-related Macular Degeneration’⁷.

Both genders are prone to anxiety/depression, a condition often considered normal in the elderly as it is frequently related to physical illness and frailty. Often it: follows the death of a partner or loss of spousal support for other reasons; occurs among elderly living alone; or, may be due to health problems often exacerbated by poor dietary intake. Elderly people’s socio-demographic networks, recent life experiences, in particular, their capacity to feel well enough to continue to contribute are in many cases influenced by their social support networks or lack thereof. In the words of Victor et al. (2005): a high level of social engagement is a key factor in achieving the individually and socially desired goal of successful ageing. With advanced age, the social context, in combination with the physical environment, exerts a more potent influence upon the experience of later life than either intrinsic genetic or biological factors. Apropos of the social context, social support deficits can impact deleteriously on how the aged experience, perceive and continue to function in life. Predominant among these deficits are: (1) living alone; (2) little or no support from neighbours; (3) rare visits from relatives; (4) one or no supportive friends; and, (5) troubled relationships with children. A combination of these factors which in the overall analysis spell ‘loss’ and ‘aloneness’ heightens the elderly person’s risk of developing depression. “Studies have reported that older people are at risk of experiencing loneliness due to death of spouses and close friends and onset of disability and illness which prevent or limit social activities” (Stanley et al., 2010: 407 citing Dykstra et al., 2005).

⁵ See Minister for Social Services (Australia), Wikipedia.

⁶ The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act was introduced in Australia in 1986 making it illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of age.

⁷ See Macular Degeneration Facts and Figures, www.mdfoundation.com.au

Limited social activity can culminate in social isolation which may be explained as a "...reduction in an older person's social network, which is distinct from the subjective unpleasant experience of feeling alone or loneliness" (Stanley et al. citing Victor et al., 2003). However, being alone or experiencing social isolation does not necessarily imply loneliness. The absence of older people's perspectives in studies about loneliness may contribute to the problems associated with what loneliness is and how it might best be managed. Although studies indicate that loneliness is indeed a tangible part of some older people's lives, little is offered in relation to how older people themselves understand and perceive loneliness (Stanley et al., 2010).

Admission of loneliness can invite further social stigma. When a person says "I am lonely" she/he invites questions regarding the reasons for her/his loneliness. Do they suggest: alcoholism; excessive gambling; emotional problems; poor family relationships; or depression? In effect, causes that signal warning signs to casual acquaintances. More socially acceptable reasons may include chronic health problems, e.g., heart conditions and debilitating arthritis, for example. Some health services offer a daily morning phone call to check on the wellbeing of the elderly person. And, welcome as that may be, it leaves the remaining 23 hours to fill. Inevitably, or at least in many cases, loneliness is associated with increased use of healthcare services, including an increased risk of premature nursing home admission (Stanley et al., 2010).

Productive Contributors

The focus of this paper will now shift to delineating how the elderly may be perceived as productive and contributing rather than lacking reciprocity; that is, rather than being labelled a burden for current society and future generations. To obtain some first-hand information, informal conversations were held at five nursing homes and two retirement villages between December 2015 and February 2016. They are located at Pennant Hills, Normanhurst, and Waitara in the northern suburbs of Sydney, and in Strathfield, an inner west suburb of Sydney. All five nursing homes are high care units; and, most of the residents were aged above 80 years, some as old as 100 years. Generally speaking, those living in retirement villages are relatively healthy and can look after themselves on a daily basis. Many only need limited support from relatives and carers. They tend to be younger than those in nursing homes. However, some among them are in their early 90s.

All of the managers of the five nursing homes pointed out that almost 80 percent of residents cannot make their contribution to society in terms of economy due to their financial and health situations. However, many can still make a contribution to society, both intellectually and socially. For example, some residents have invited the public to attend their painting exhibitions. We had a chance to visit a 94-year-old resident at a retirement village in February 2016. During WWII, he served as a soldier in the Australian military, fought the Japanese, and was taken a prisoner-of-war. After the war, he worked in Japan, Hong Kong, the UK and Australia as an engineer until he retired 30 years ago. Since then, he has been enthusiastically engaged in Returned Services League (RSL) activities; e.g., organising and participating in the ANZAC Day March every year.⁸

Based on his experience during the war years, he published a poem about the war. From time to time, he is invited to talk to high school students about his war experience. His participation has proven very valuable: it has enabled the younger generation to study the history of the war as detailed by a former serving soldier. During our chat, it became evident that he had a comprehensive grasp of the current environmental issues, e.g., climate change and CO₂ emissions. His daughter told us that he frequently offers his advice regarding local councils' engineering projects, such as smaller roads and stormwater management. He is very proud that he still can use his engineering training and skills to serve the local community. We also met some elderly people who have opted to remain in their own homes. Many among them are still making a sound contribution to society. Among them was an 88 year-old farmer who earlier lived in the rural area of Dubbo in western New South Wales. For many years he managed a farm carrying 9,000 sheep. Nowadays he lets his son take control; but, he still helps his son to manage the farm on a daily basis. He will continue to do so until he becomes 'really old'.

⁸Anzac Day is a national day of remembrance in Australia and New Zealand that broadly commemorates all Australian and New Zealanders who served and died in all wars, conflicts, peacekeeping operations, as well as the contribution and suffering of all those who have served. Observed on 25 April each year, Anzac Day's original purpose was to honor all of the members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who fought at Gallipoli against the Turks during World War I. The spirit of Anzac, with its qualities of courage, mate ship, and sacrifice, continues to have meaning and relevance for Australians' sense of national identity.

Shifting to the academic sphere, we cite a Doctor of Philosophy who is 85 years of age. In 2000, she started copy-editing PhD theses for overseas PhD students. She remains very productive and capable. As of 2016, she is still editing PhD theses and can complete one in less than two weeks. During the same period, she has copy-edited some 30 international journal articles for scholars whose native languages are other than English. She is still actively engaged in research. In recent years, she has published papers in international journals. In 2014, she was invited to give a paper at an international conference in Paris. We have no doubt that there are many other septuagenarians and octogenarians quite capable of contributing to society, once given the opportunity⁹. One example of a more progressive approach to stimulating the interests of the elderly is provided by New Zealand's award-winning Ranfurly Village hospital, which appears to offer a variety of pleasantly accommodating forms of activities and services¹⁰.

Frequently, one reads of government predictions vis-à-vis the financial burden of the ageing in terms of numbers. 'Panic leads politicians to encourage older people to stay in the workforce to ensure that they will have enough money throughout their retirement years' (Leonard and Johansson, 2008). However, evidence shows that the government's predictive figures may prove unreliable. In 2004, Australia's fertility rate was low, prompting then Treasurer Peter Costello to urge Australians as follows: "You should have one for the father, one for the mother and one for the country. If you want to fix the ageing demographic, that's what you do" (*The Age*, 2004). By 2016, "Australia's burgeoning population hides something we should all be worried about..." (Jason Murphy, news.com.au 19 Feb. 2016).

Future Efforts

Scholarly research revealed a lack of policy and practices relating to the active engagement of older people in the community (Leonard and Johansson, 2008). We will suggest that programs be put in place that: (1) will encourage productivity among the adequately functioning aged in Care facilities; (2) will encourage the ageing to continue to contribute both socially and economically; and, (3) will present a fair and positive image of the ageing; that is, portray them as productive contributors rather than as a perceived burden on both society today and upon future generations. We make these suggestions in full realisation that they will be greeted with the customary 'There is no money' and reference to 'liability'. Our aim in proposing them is to restore to Australia's ageing demographic the respect that they have earned throughout their lifetimes that in many cases have not afforded them the comforts available to – and accepted as the 'norm' by – today's generations. To this end, we propose the programs in detail as follows:

(1) Programs designed to encourage productivity among the adequately functioning aged in care facilities could include: (a) the introduction of bi-yearly Nursing Home fêtes at which items will be sold (all made by the elderly) and the money used judiciously (inviting participant input). For example, women will be encouraged to knit, embroider, quilt, and/or crochet objects that can be sold at the fête. The day before, those interested and able will be encouraged to cook their favourite recipes under (and with the help of) supervision, producing cakes that will sell. As well, painting will be encouraged. We observed one facility where paintings were exhibited but not offered for sale. Our vision includes the sale of the paintings; (b) the introduction of the following three hour programs to be undertaken in the mornings and *supervised by trusted and capable volunteers*. These will include extension of Men's SHED activities. The families of active elderly male residents will be asked to bring 'favourite tools' that will enable the residents to make small (probably wooden) objects that can be sold. Gardening will also be a feature, an activity well recognised for its therapeutic value.

⁹In 2012, Allan Stewart, aged 97, graduated MA in Clinical Sciences from a university in Lismore, Australia; in 2014 a 93 year old female PhD candidate graduated from Sydney University; in 2015 a 90 year old graduated with a Master's degree from the Australian National University (ANU); and in 2016 an 84 year old Everal Compton published his definitive work on Flynn of the Outback. An aboriginal woman who started painting in her 80s earned wide acclaim that saw her work exhibited both in her homeland and overseas.

¹⁰Ranfurly Village Hospital won 2 Excellence of Care awards in 2014. 'Residents enjoy frequent outings in our brand new Mercedes van, coffee in a café, the theatre, the Ellerslie (horse) traces, and trips to the park to feed the ducks'. The hospital provides: a physio 20 hours per week and an assistant physio 20 hrs per week; an occupational therapist (by referral); divisional therapist/activities co-ordinator; and, a varied and exciting activities program. As well, a podiatrist makes regular visits. The hospital has an award winning food service team. There are visits from schools, pet therapists, musicians and entertainers. A GP service 24/7 and a resident cat (See <https://www.eldernet.co.nz/>).

As well, we suggest the taping (where agreed to) of past histories of the elderly. Although they may not be of immediate interest to today's 'high-tech' cohort, there is little doubt that their stories will constitute a repository of information that will prove invaluable in future years.

(2) It is essential that programs be introduced that will encourage the ageing to continue to make a contribution both economically and socially. For example, grandparents caring for their grandchildren. In Australia, there is a huge demand for childcare services. The existing childcare services cannot meet all of the needs associated with childcare due to very limited staff and facilities. Many children have to wait one or two years - sometimes longer - to be accepted. As a result, many former working parents have to stay at home to look after their young children, postponing their return to the workplace. These days, many grandparents are still very healthy and energetic. Given the high price of childcare, if the elderly can look after their grandchildren three or four days per week, it will not only relieve the pressure on childcare services but provide much needed support for working parents. Grandparents caring for their grandchildren are not something totally new. It has proved invaluable and been successfully practiced in many places in Europe, the US, and in various other countries for decades past (Hanks and Buber, 2009).

Recently, the Australian government (2016) introduced a program called *Grandparent Child Care Benefit* which covers the full cost of the total fee charged for Child Care Benefit eligible hours; i.e., up to 50 hours for each child in Child Care Benefit approved care each week. We hope that many other programs or policies will follow this government initiative; for example, review of the current tax system. If a person has reached retirement age and can still work, for the first five years, his or her personal income tax should be reduced by 50% of the level prior to retirement. If a person works for ten years post her/his retirement age, that person should no longer be required to pay any income tax. This would encourage more elderly to continue to make a social and economic contribution; keep them both physically and mentally healthy; and, by extension, greatly reduce the perceived ageing 'burden' on society.

(3) Disseminating a fair and positive image of the ageing. Over past years, the country's politicians, government agencies and the multimedia have painted a very negative image of the country's elderly. This is not only unfair to the latter; as well, it distorts public perception, especially the young generation's view of the elderly. And, of even greater concern is the fact that the adoption of derogatory attitudes hurts the elderly, both psychologically and physically. Persistence with this attitude will prove a barrier to developing positive public policy and practice for the country's ageing population. In fact, it will further isolate the elderly from society. In future, politicians, governments, multimedia, and school education policies should adopt very positive approach to educate, guide and influence public perceptions, views and attitudes towards the ageing and age-related issues. Elderly people's importance and contribution should be frequently recognised and reported via the multimedia; and, the 'bombarding' of the ageing with negative language and imagery should cease. The advocating of respect and caring for the elderly should be a basic, social moral 'norm' in a modern and civilised society.

Concluding remarks

Critical to productive ageing are a reasonable level of physical and mental health, life satisfaction, confidence, and the ability to socially and personally adjust. Ageing need not inevitably be a time of decline and dependency, nor should it be publicly proclaimed 'a problem'. The ageing frequently refers to them as 'invisible'. Society no longer 'sees' them. But, notwithstanding, they occupy a prominent place in political discourse. Australia's elderly have a voice that needs to be heard. Constant government reference to this cohort as a 'threat to the economy', and as 'a financial burden for future generations' – rather than encouraging respect, interest and enquiry - fosters stigmatization of the elderly as a problem, by society in general and in particular by an apprehensive young, striving to 'get ahead'. We strongly argue that Australian society needs urgent change in terms of politics, public policy, and the general public's attitudes towards the country's ageing population. In particular, politicians, governments, multimedia, and school education should recognise and encourage: (1) productivity among the adequately functioning aged in Care facilities. This will not only allow elderly people to make a contribution both socially and economically: it will create a fair and positive image of the ageing; and, (2) They will be depicted as productive contributors rather than as a perceived economic burden on society today and upon future generations. Only when the government adopts a more compassionate approach, and the above measures are put in place, will respect and caring for the elderly be observed as their social and moral right. Neo-liberalist ideologically driven concern with a perceived 'apocalyptic' view of the country's ageing is both unfair and unsubstantiated.

The fact that many of Australia's elderly make significant economic and social contributions to Australian society 'refutes the stereotype that seniors are a self-interested group associated only with dependency and high use of social services (Lui et al., 2011). We will suggest that of the three prerequisites for successful ageing, i.e.: (1) Free from Disease and Disability; (2) Good Cognitive Function; and (3), Good Social Engagement/Social Inclusion, the third is perhaps the most vital. If social inclusion is to be successful, it must recognise individual differences and values and different economic circumstances. And, in the final analysis, much depends upon how friendly a society is towards its elderly.

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