

CREATIVE AGEING AND THE ARTS OF CARE

Reframing Active Ageing

ELIZABETH BROOKE



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Creative Ageing and the Arts of Care: Reframing Active Ageing

BY

ELIZABETH BROOKE

The University of Melbourne, Australia



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my mother Olga, whose joy in creative enlivenment in late life
inspired this book.

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About the Author



Elizabeth Brooke is based in the School of Population and Global Health, Melbourne University, Australia. Her interests span work, retirement, innovative models of social inclusion and extending creativity at later stages of the life course. She holds a PhD in Social Gerontology, is a Fulbright recipient and a past Associate Editor of the *Australasian Journal on Ageing*.

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Preface

When I first started writing this book, it was about ‘other’ older people. Then with my own ageing I began to really experience what I was writing about. Attributing a back-ache to ageing does not help lift spirits; in fact, conversations with other ‘ageing’ people become more and more about exchanging views about the health conditions of oneself and others, retreating into the biological nature of living, and less and less about challenging and realising the self in the outside world.

I had worked as an academic gerontologist for several decades researching older workers and age discrimination. Yet a firewall existed between concepts of attainment and social connection gained through paid work and continuing to develop creative potentialities after leaving the paid workforce. The literature is increasingly distinguishing the permeability of the boundaries between workforce exits and re-entries as forms of ‘unretirement’. Yet the value proposition to keep on developing skills and growing imaginatively, conceptually and artistically after formal ‘retirement’ was not on the table.

A new stage of the life course has been unveiled and opened up due to increasing longevity and healthier life spans. The paradigms of creative engagement have shifted, yet have not shifted enough to encompass creative activities in everyday life. There is a residual perception that creative ageing benefits advantaged elite groups rather than extending and benefiting diverse groups of older people living in their communities. Why aren’t there commonly accessible local arts venues in diverse neighbourhoods where older adults can come to make different forms of art with other like-minded people? Ageing well in communities somehow falls beyond the scope of artistic, imaginative enhancement. Everyday cultural participation requires a newly designed architecture to become an ordinary rather than an extraordinary thing to do.

Dance, visual arts, theatre and music are researched in this book as forms of art-making by older adults. A multiplicity of options that stem from individual choices can evoke inventiveness and enchantment. There will be people who are not interested in or are not able for many reasons to participate. For others, it will be the beginning of a journey of inward inspiration and outward aspiration to show their artwork in communities. For others, just sharing a space to make arts and crafts with others is enough.

The book sub-title of *active ageing* mandates supporting the quality of life of older people. It demands that *who* people are, that is their identities are not ignored and neglected either in the community or in care settings. Quality of life which attends to the potentiality of continual growth of the self is an integral element of quality of care. In this COVID-19 pandemic, and the recurrent imperatives of lockdown, the ‘arts of care’ require creative *self-care* and inward attention to how people can best care for their growing selves.

The arts evoke beauty, a fundamental concept, and beauty pursued with others collectively is transformative. How beauty can be written about requires words which can acutely transpose experiences through language. Sharing a sense of beauty with others is an uplifting and profound experience. The experiences and voices of respondents were real and ‘alive’, qualities that I did not want to sacrifice. The challenge was to find the balance between communicating what people experienced and conceptual frames interpreting these experiences.

A wellspring of this book is my experience with my mother, who had suffered from dementia for over a decade. While experiencing dementia she lived in the community for almost four years and then in a nursing home until she was almost 101. A dance and movement class was taken by Fran Ostrobrurski, an experienced dance movement therapist. I sat in the class with my mother and six older women, some of whom were non-verbal, listening to a variety of selected music.

A sense of wonder and enchantment illuminated their eyes as they reached out to touch and wave coloured silk streamers, in rhythm with the changing music. The internal esprit, vitality and intuition revealed through moving to music outshone the normalised conventional boundaries of expression for these older women. Transformations through art-making can reach the inner creative self, the root of the tree, that has persisted from childhood.

I want to take the reader along the pathway I took in coming to conclusions about the contribution of creative ageing to the quality of life of older adults. Many personal stories are told in the chapters on the art forms which I hope readers can be carried along by. The academic literature of social gerontology in which this book mainly sits, as an Emerald academic publication, provided interpretative frameworks augmenting the scope and integration of explanations. Primarily, I wanted what people said, ‘to live’, and did not want to go down theoretical rabbit holes, never to surface again with what I found important to say. The concluding chapters synthesise process elements extracted from the case studies of arts, which are integrated as multilevel recommendations. This final intent is to open the door at the policy and practical end of this enquiry.

So, this book sits at multipurpose cross-currents, perhaps rapids, through which I hope to contribute to the ‘social movement’ of creative ageing.

I wish to thank the many people I interviewed for their rich accounts of their experiences and contexts, explaining why they participate in the art forms and what they get out of it. This is the real substance of this book upon which its conceptualisations rest.

Elizabeth Brooke
Melbourne, January 2022

Note: The terminology of this book employs the term ‘older adults’ to stress the continuation of adulthood. The terminology for older people living in the community independently does not have a common descriptor. The term ‘ageing sector’ is ambiguous, while the ‘aged care sector’, in general, refers to provision of care. So ‘community-based’ older adults may be the closest descriptor of this sector.

Acknowledgements

The journey started from a session on older workers and retirement at the International Sociology Association World Congress of Sociology Toronto in 2018, sharing musical interests with Sarah Vickerstaff, Áine Ní Léime and Clary Krekula. The idea for this book had been brewing for some time and I decided to set off. Once on the road, Victoria Hume, of Creative Health and Wellbeing Alliance UK, referred me to Dominic Campbell, of Creative Aging International. Dominic provided an early chart which was greatly appreciated, which branched into maps orienteering the way to significant creative ageing projects. Thank you to Tara Byrne and Mary Harkin from Age & Opportunity for guiding me to projects within Bealtaine festival and even taking me there. In New York, Christine Leahy, of New York State Council on the Arts, led me towards new projects. Thanks to Jane Sims for being the first eye to look at this book. And heartfelt thanks to Julie Faulkner for her support with editing and being a literary, skilled and gentle voice.

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