

Liveable Communities Workshop Outputs: Archetypal Older People

The object of this activity was to familiarise participants with the diversity of the older population aged from 50 years up. Each workgroup was assigned a particular age group (55, 65, 75, 85, and 95). They were asked to construct a typical person of this age: where they live, their activities in a typical week, their concerns and aspirations. In short, to create a 'story' about the life of a person in the age group assigned to their workgroup. Archetypes were personalised by giving them a name.

Using the comments on the body outlines, a narrative was constructed for each archetypal person developed. These were compared within the same age grouping. As participants were asked to form these archetypes based on the people they know, it is likely that the archetypes contain reflections of their own lives and how they view themselves in the future. An overview of each age grouping follows.

55 year old archetypes

At 55 most archetypes were continuing life as before with just a few inklings that they are ageing. Still in the workforce and socially and physically active, 55 year olds are mostly thinking of financial security rather than planning for their future living arrangements and proximity to services. Common themes in this age group were:

- Living in their own home, which is freestanding, owned outright or mortgaged
- Supporting late teen/adult children living at home
- Supporting their adult children with informal child care and babysitting
- Still part of the workforce either part time or full time
- Enjoying social and sporting activities, with some mention of volunteer activities
- Concerned about future finances
- Noticing physical changes in their bodies, but either not yet troubled by them or have them under control with medication.
- A mention of being carers for ageing parents
- Partnered (one was divorced)

Two contrasting examples of archetypal 55 year olds follow. One has a relatively affluent lifestyle without any financial concerns, while the other juggles multiple roles against a background of minimal financial resources.

"Jenny is 55 years old and lives with her husband in a large house near the water. They are a two car family and they also own a boat and a holiday house at Port Macquarie. They have three adult children and two grandchildren. Jenny has not worked full time since the arrival of the first child and left the paid workforce entirely some five years ago. She is a volunteer with the church and with a local charity, and also supports the local art gallery and arts centre. Jenny has a very active social life: she belongs to the book club and the garden club, is a theatre-goer, and plays social tennis. She and her husband like to travel overseas for holidays at least once a year. Jenny likes to look after her appearance and goes to the hairdresser once a week and admits to having some cosmetic work done. She aspires to be the family matriarch and keep on living the good life."

“Maria is 55 years old and migrated to Australia from Laos in her twenties. She and her husband are still paying off the mortgage on their home where they raised four children, two girls, who are now married, and two sons who still live at home. Maria’s life is very busy and she rarely gets time for herself: in addition to her own household duties and looking after the vegetable patch in the garden, she supports her ageing parents, who live in their own home, and helps out with the babysitting for her daughters. Maria and her husband and their extended family don’t speak English at home and she has never had formal language lessons. Consequently her ability to read and write English is limited, although she can understand spoken English very well. When time allows at the weekends, she and her husband go to the local club for a meal in the bistro to get a bit of time for themselves. Her joints are becoming a little stiff and arthritic, but not too troublesome at this stage. However, it is a reminder that she is getting older and she is starting to think about the future and their financial security when they both stop working. They only have the basic level of superannuation paid by their employers, so once the money runs out they will be fully dependent on the Age Pension.”

65 year old archetypes

Lifestyles of this grouping are depicted as busy and sociable, but with growing concerns about their health, particularly those in rural areas who have to travel significant distances for specialist appointments. The desire to travel was one theme continuing from the 55 age group, as was living in the family home. Concerns about finances at 55 appear to be replaced by concerns about health at 65. Common themes in this age group were:

- About to retire from the workforce if not retired already
- Some partnered, others divorced or widowed
- Beginnings of becoming carers for partners and/or parents
- Health issues becoming more prominent, but under control
- Grandparenthood now established and undertaking regular child care and babysitting
- Volunteering more prominent and first mentions of the Men’s Shed and U3A
- Lifestyles still busy with family, social, and volunteer commitments

Two contrasting archetypes follow:

“Jim is 65, widowed and lives in his own home. He is working full time and at the point of giving up work now that his health has deteriorated. Jim has several medical conditions: enlarged prostate, heart disease, high blood pressure and the beginnings of osteoporosis. Jim wears glasses and recently got fitted for hearing aids. He had a fall last year and it has taken him a while to get over it, and this also caused him to feel frustrated and depressed. However, giving up work means that his financial situation is not good – his super is very basic – and he doesn’t know how long he will be able to afford his car. Most of his family live interstate, but he has one daughter nearby and he sometimes looks after the grandchildren for a few hours at the weekends. He has heard about the Men’s Shed and thinks he will check them out when he retires.”

“Daniella is 65 years old and lives out of town in her own home with her husband, two dogs and a cat. She is employed full time as a shop assistant. She has three children

and five grandchildren and helps out with child minding when she is not working in the shop. One grandchild has Asperger's and needs a lot of attention. She also does what she can for her father who has dementia. Once a month she has a spot on the local volunteer community radio station. Daniella manages to do the household shopping in her lunch break and this gives her time to also involve herself with the church community at the weekend. She does some of her shopping online. Daniella is concerned about her financial security and as she doesn't have a lot of superannuation she is not sure how to go about planning for retirement. Living out of town means time spent travelling, not just to work, but to medical appointments. Having so many commitments, Daniella often neglects her own wellbeing and has been putting off a minor medical procedure that she knows she should have."

75 year old archetypes

At 75 years of age, living in one's family home with a long term partner remains a recurrent theme regardless of location. Life appears to be a little more of a struggle as health issues begin to become problematic particularly if one partner needs care support. The need for support services is mentioned in this grouping, but knowing about them or how to apply for them appears to be an issue. Themes at this age are less common and more diverse. Some commonalities are:

- Continuing to live in the family home regardless of location or suitability
- Body functions becoming more problematic, but not yet stopping participation in activities
- Active grandparenting is continuing
- Maintaining social networks and undertaking a physical exercise activity
- Carer duties becoming more prominent, particularly caring for partners
- Likely to be on a full or part Age Pension

The two archetypes below show the diversity of life at 75 years.

"Fred is 75 years old and has been happily married for 53 years, but he and his wife have different aspirations for their future living arrangements. Fred wants to stay on the farm for as long as possible, but his wife is ready to move into town. Fred's general health is quite good although he does suffer with his back sometimes and he has to keep an eye on his skin for cancer. Fred hasn't yet retired although his family are suggesting that he do this soon. In the end it might be the weather that pushes him – another long drought or flood. The future looks uncertain for Fred – he doesn't know if he will qualify for a part pension and it is unclear what will happen to the farm when he eventually leaves. Fred enjoys the company at the Men's Shed and the Gun Club."

"Elizabeth is 75 years old and lives in the family home in Bowral with her 85 year old husband who has dementia, which was brought on by a minor stroke. Her family, two children and four grandchildren live out of the area, but visit regularly and try to support her in her caring role. As a carer, she spends most of her time at home and so many of her activities are home-based. She cooks for the church's fund raising events and keeps a small vegetable garden. However, with the family's help she is able to get out once a week to participate in U3A and a weekly game of bridge. Elizabeth aspires to visit her daughter who lives in Canada, but is not sure how she can make this happen. As she keeps good health, Elizabeth expects to be driving well into her eighties and knows that

the car is the link to her social life and the means by which her husband can get medical attention. She doesn't know what she will do if and when she has to give up the car. Elizabeth has heard that there are community support services that could help her with her husband's care, but she hasn't applied for it yet."

85 year old archetypes

There is a variation of living arrangements at this age. A change in living arrangements emerged with the first mention of moving to a self-care unit, or considering this move. Also included in the mix is living in a flat/unit. However, most are continuing to 'stay put', some with the support of community care services. Most are dependent on the Age Pension which means they have to budget carefully and choose free or low cost activities. Between the ages of 75 and 85 the archetypes have become widowed. Common themes are:

- Living alone, mostly in the family home
- Concerns for social isolation
- Greater dependency on home based care services
- Those with a car desire to keep driving, but know this is time limited
- Dependency on others for transportation to activities and medical appointments
- Dependency on the Age Pension

The three narratives that follow have several similarities – living alone, receiving help, but still active in the community, and beginning to have concerns for the future.

"Muriel is 85 years old and lives with her dog in the family home, a single storey weatherboard house. She has several general health issues and feels she is always at the doctor for something. She takes medication for her heart and blood pressure, and generally eats what she wants. Muriel has some hearing loss and continence issues, and this sometimes prevents her from socialising with new people. She belongs to a club that organises group holiday tours, which she enjoys because they all know each other well. Fortunately she is still able to drive and this means she can continue with U3A, but the upkeep of the car means there is not much money left to do other things. The costs of heating her home in winter are also a concern as the costs keep rising. Her family don't live nearby, but she usually sees them for birthdays and Christmas. When they visit, they usually help her clean up the yard."

"Sadie is 85 years old and is living on her own in a 'care' setting. She gets some assistance with the heavier house cleaning, but now needs help with the garden. Sadie goes to the Day Care Club once a week where she does some craft and Tai Chi. She still gets out and about around town in her little car and uses her walking frame for assistance when walking, and consequently Sadie still manages to do a little volunteer work for the church and the CWA. She is starting to worry how she will manage in the future as she is feeling much more dependent on others to do things for her – she fears loss of her physical, emotional and financial control."

"Les is 85 years old and living with his cat in the family home which he owns outright. He still drives around town for short trips, but is not as active as he used to be. He volunteers once a month with Meals on Wheels and helps out where he can at the RSL where he is on the welfare committee. He enjoys a game of bowls and goes to church

where he meets up with friends and neighbours. He thinks he could do more with his week if his driver's licence would allow him to travel a bit further afield, and if he had a little more disposable income. While he enjoys good health now, he has heard that there are community services that can help out."

95 year old archetypes

The trend to living in supported accommodation is depicted at this age. However, not all are in this situation. Some are still living in the family home, and one is living with family. Loss of sight and hearing are mentioned more at this age and all are receiving some form of home based assistance. Home modifications and assistive technology are mentioned for the first time in this age grouping. All are living alone except one.

Common themes are:

- Increasing frailty resulting in loss of confidence
- Eyesight and hearing is deteriorating
- Mobility is more problematic
- Memory loss more apparent
- More likely to be living in supported housing
- Receiving home support services
- Enjoy socialising, but also happy to spend time at home

The two selected archetypes reflect similar lives, but perhaps with different perspectives on life. Both intend to live out their lives in their current home.

"Myrtle is 95 years old and lives alone with her cat and the support of community services. Her home has been modified and she has a ramp to the front door and grab bars in the bathroom, a toilet seat riser and an emergency call button (VitalCall). Myrtle is expecting to live long enough to get a letter from the Queen, although she may not be able to read it due to the deterioration in her eyesight. However, Myrtle still has a quick mind and still knits baby goods for the church fete. She is able to do the large print crossword and enjoys a game of bridge. Myrtle is losing her confidence to go out alone, as she doesn't feel safe, particularly when crossing the road, because of her failing eyesight. Myrtle is quite content to live out her days at home and has no intention of living in a village or hostel."

"George is 95 and lives on his own in a public housing house and was widowed fifteen years ago. He and his wife spent all their married life in this house and raised their two children here, and had their grandchildren to stay many times as they were growing up. But now he is worried about being moved out into a single aged pensioner unit away from everyone and everything familiar. He knows the Department of Housing are looking closely at his case. George has experienced several bereavements in the last fifteen years, first his wife, then one of his sons and recently one of his children died in a road accident. He feels depressed a lot of the time and the worry about being moved out is adding to his anxieties. In spite of this, he hopes to "live another year" – he's not ready "to go" yet and hopes he will see more of his family. George's mobility is not good – he has a wheeled walker but he doesn't like using it. He gets meals on wheels, home care and lawn mowing. Most days he sits at home watching the TV. He knows about computers and mobile phones, but feels he is too old to learn about the new technology. George doesn't get out much because of the cost of transport."