



Rethinking Ageing: Conceptualization, Measurement and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the links between the way ageing is theorized, conceptualized, measured and treated in the modern western societies, EU in particular. We look into alternative concepts of ageing that move beyond the narrow emphasis on economic activity promoted by the mainstream notion of active ageing. We explore the theoretical lining behind these normative concepts and the way it interacts with empirical measures of ageing. We then look into the policy implications and possibilities to further develop inclusive, context-sensitive policy frameworks and indicators that acknowledge diverse pathways of ageing and promote well-being, security, and meaning in later life beyond the constraints of the active ageing model.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS








Theoretical concepts of ageing and their measurements are **inherently normative** and emphasize specific dimensions of ageing. In policy contexts, choosing one index over another can **reallocate attention and resources**, sometimes productively (by countering ageism and promoting strength-based narratives), but also by **entrenching prescriptive standards and unrealistic expectations** for older adults. It can be argued that the concepts of **healthy, active, and productive ageing** are quite instrumental, lack subjective aspects, and are biased towards biomedical and productive framings of ageing. Notions of **resilient and optimal ageing** place a lot of emphasis on individual adaptation, with a risk of normalizing structural problems. Concepts of **positive and successful ageing** have a strong normative connotation, but also have potential to broaden policy debate and serve as more balanced integrative models. However, there is a lack of readily available and widely acknowledged empirical measures for the latter concepts.











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HEALTHY AGEING (WHO, 2017; WHA, 2020)	
Functional ability = intrinsic capacity + environment fit	
▲ Life-course lens	▼ Biomedical bias
▲ Links function to context	▼ Underplays subjective aspects
ACTIVE AGEING (WHO, 2002; Zaidi & Howse, 2017; Foster & Walker, 2021)	
Continuing social, economic, cultural and civic participation	
▲ Counters dependency stereotypes	▼ Instrumental/productivity framing
▲ Promotes participation	▼ Underplays subjective aspects
PRODUCTIVE AGEING (Gonzales et. al., 2020; Mandville-Anstey et al., 2021; Dommaraju & Wong 2021)	
Participation in paid and unpaid productive activities	
▲ Supports purpose and social ties	▼ Instrumental/productivity framing
▲ Capabilities via engagement	▼ Underplays subjective aspects
POSITIVE AGEING (Posock et al., 2023; Otto et al., 2023)	
Balances psychosocial, economic and health aspects of ageing	
▲ Strengths-based	▼ Broad as an umbrella concept
▲ Adaptability, autonomy, resilience	▼ Individual responsibility
SUCCESSFUL AGEING (Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Ryff, 2014; Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009; Wagg et al., 2021)	
Low disease/disability + high function + active engagement	
▲ Seminal integrative model	▼ Normative/ableist tendencies
▲ Shifted discourse beyond decline	▼ Unrealistic disease-free expectation
RESILIENT AGEING (Hicks & Conner, 2014; Waddell et al., 2025)	
Ability to recover from or adapt effectively to misfortune or change	
▲ Applies across health states	▼ Normalizes structural problems
▲ Avoids 'well vs. ill' dichotomy	▼ Individual responsibility
OPTIMAL AGEING (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Aldwin et al., 2006; Ryff, 2014)	
Selection + optimization + compensation (SOC)	
▲ Process-oriented & holistic	▼ Vague, difficult to operationalize
▲ Integrates adaptation, well-being	▼ Prescriptive, over-rational

Seven theoretical concepts of ageing presented above encompass a range of aspects, which we categorize into four dimensions: biomedical / functional, psychological / cognitive, social / environment, and economic / material. Below, we present indices that indicate whether and to what degree the empirical measures capture and emphasize the dimensions highlighted in these theoretical frameworks.

THEORETICAL DIMENSIONS	Dimension								Description	
	Biomedical / functional	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	This dimension encompasses various medical indicators (including illnesses, disabilities, and disorders) of the physiological functioning of the body.	
	Psychological / cognitive	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	This dimension includes psychological health, well-being, and cognitive functions (such as memory and concentration).
	Social / environment	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	This dimension encompasses social relations, participation in unpaid activities, the environment (including infrastructure and environmental sustainability), and services.
	Economic / material	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	<div><div></div></div>	This dimension covers assets and income, as well as systems and policies that affect individuals' economic situation (pension schemes, poverty and employment indicators, educational attainment).

Empirical measurement		■ Biomedical / functional	■ Psychological / cognitive	■ Social / environment	■ Economic / material
	 Healthy Aging Index (Mikelsons et al., 2023)	7	4	2	
	 HAPI - Healthy Ageing and Prevention Index (ILCUK)	2	1	1	2
	 Active Ageing Index (UNECE/EC)	4	1	9	8
	 Productive Ageing (framework & indicators)	1	1	4	4
	 Positive Ageing Indicators (New Zealand: 2007)	4	3	5	4
	 Positive Aging Scale (PAS, 2024)	5		3	
	 Successful Ageing (Rowe & Kahn – common operationalization)	4	3	3	4
	 Successful Ageing (Index of Societal Aging)	2	1	8	5
	 Resilient Ageing (Resilience Scale for Older Adults – RSOA)	4		3	
	 Optimal Aging (National project)	3	2	4	3
Count of indicators					