



# What Do You Mean, ‘How Do I Feel about Ageing?’: Exploring Ageing Concepts on the Island of Gozo

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## Abstract

Malta is experiencing a strong trend toward population ageing. In 2014, the government implemented an active ageing policy designed to address the perceived economic and social ramifications of an ageing population. In a commitment to break away from perceptions of ageing that equate with infirmity and decline, the policy underscores independence, productivity, and activity as meaningful goals in later life. Ethnographic data gathered from conversations with both Gozitan-born and English expatriate retirees (UK expats), investigated their perceptions of ageing. Tensions were revealed between the active ageing paradigm and core values and notions of personhood favoured by older adults. Respondents resisted identification with an ageing cohort, whilst valuing a safe and relaxed lifestyle and inter-generational social and familial relationships. These early findings destabilise the neoliberal and universalistic claims of the active ageing-paradigm, raising questions for further research.

**Keywords** Active ageing · anthropology of ageing · gerontology · neoliberalism · ageing policy

## Introduction

Increased longevity is one of humanity’s greatest achievements, reflecting the success of major improvements in sanitation, nutrition, biomedical interventions, and public health policies (Buch, 2015). These successes, coupled with declining fertility levels, mean that Malta is experiencing an increasingly ageing population. In 2016, the percentage of Malta’s population aged over 65 was 19.4% (National Statistics

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Office Malta, 2017). By 2025 this demographic has been predicted to swell to 31.2%, highlighting a future decline in the percentage of the working population (Formosa, 2013). These developments and future predictions mean that ageing has become an issue for policy makers concerned with the effects of an ageing population on future economic growth and health and social care systems<sup>1</sup>. My aim is to explore perspectives of ageing and notions of personhood through the lens of retirees living in Gozo in the context of policy initiatives which have been developed in response to ageing. Throughout, I have incorporated my personal subjective experiences, which form an important part of the anthropological ethnographic approach I have taken where “theory, reflection, musings, quandaries, inspirations and analytic leaps of discovery are all contemporaneous with the practice of doing ethnographic research” (Madden, 2010, p. 7). The first section outlines Malta’s active ageing policies in response to the current demographic trend. The second section introduces my research and reviews the literature on prevailing ageing concepts in the US and Europe. The third section details the methods used to gather qualitative data from participants, followed by a discussion of the results and conclusion.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the proportion of people aged over 60 is the fastest growing demographic (World Health Organisation, 2002). In 2002, in response to concerns about whether “a shrinking labour force” can support countries experiencing population ageing, the WHO introduced a policy framework titled “Active Ageing,” to promote the notion of activity as the basis for continued life satisfaction in relation to ageing (World Health Organisation, 2002, p. 9). In a policy brief issued by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Economic Commission (UNECE) for member nations facing these trends, recommendations suggest the encouragement of older persons in active participation in employment, social life, and independent living (European Commission, 2013).

The Maltese government responded to its demographic trend by implementing “*The National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing: Malta 2014–2020*” which “reflects the Government’s quest in implementing a vision that acts as a catalyst for improved levels of positive, productive and successful living in later life” (National Commission for Active Ageing, n.d., p.8). To combat future obstacles an ageing population may present, three major strategies were outlined. Firstly, the policy advocated longer working lives, “to overturn a shrinking working age population that risks acting as a drag on economic growth, through labour and skill shortage” (National Commission for Active Ageing, n.d., p. 9). The second commitment was to encourage those not in the labour market to participate in society and maintain feelings of self-worth “so that retirement should not push older persons towards a fringe role in the Maltese social fabric” (National Commission for Active Ageing, n.d., p. 9). The third endeavour emphasised the importance of maintaining independence and wellbeing by means of an active lifestyle. This focus on action and participation marked a shift away from traditional perceptions in the 1970 and 1980 s, when welfare policies encouraged retirement as a time to embrace a more sedentary life (Formosa, 2013b).

<sup>1</sup> Malta, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Latvia, Germany, Romania and Croatia have been predicted to have an age dependency ratio of 80% or above by 2070 ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/ip065\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/ip065_en.pdf)).

Moreover, it was a deliberate attempt to move away from conceptualising ageing in terms of infirmity and decline, in favour of a model which underscored productivity, activity and independence as meaningful goals in later life (National Commission for Active Ageing, n.d.).

The “active ageing” model, which is predominantly featured in European policy responses reflects, in theory, underlying holistic intentions, such as the inclusion of older people in social participation, and concerns around their mental and physical wellbeing, but in practice, has inclined toward a narrow “productivist” perspective which views ageing purely in economic terms (Foster & Walker, 2015, p. 83). Malta’s active ageing policy has indeed achieved success in enabling higher rates of “employment, social participation, and independent living amongst persons aged 60-plus...” but it has been critiqued for overlooking the heterogeneity of older persons and their individual experiences of ageism and age discrimination based on socio-economic circumstances, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality (Formosa, 2020, p. 13). The succeeding policy, the *National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing Malta 2021–2027* has addressed these oversights by extending the scope of the active ageing model in favour of a more holistic and comprehensive approach which aims to address diversity and inequality whilst maintaining its commitment to “transforming society’s perception of ageing from one of dependency to active ageing...” (National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing Malta, 2021–2027, p. 10). However, critics have argued that despite these attempts, the activity-based paradigm holds firm. My research considers such activity-based policy commitments in the context of the lived experiences of retirees living in Gozo.

Gozo is one of Malta’s three islands, the other two being Malta itself and the almost uninhabited island of Comino. Together these islands comprise an archipelago located in the Mediterranean Sea, between Italy and Libya. Malta is the largest island and is the “cultural, commercial and administrative centre” whilst Gozo, the “sister island,” is “greener, more rural and smaller” (VisitMalta, n.d.). Malta bears the legacy of many foreign rulers, the last of which were the British in 1814–1964 (Galizia, 2017). During this time Malta’s economy was based on provision of services to its rulers through the defence establishment (Boissevain, 2013). Following many years of hardship due to the defence industry’s gradual decline, and during the subsequent granting of independence, the government focused on the creation of a mass tourism industry and tourist-related building industry (Boissevain, 2013). Fiscal policies were geared towards attracting wealthy British settlers to Malta and many with armed-services connections also became part of the retirement flow back to Malta and Gozo (Warnes & Patterson, 1998). It has subsequently become a popular retirement destination for UK expats (VisitMalta, n.d.). Today Malta’s economy is heavily focused on tourism and, as Galizia (2017, p.1) asserts, “whether measured by per capita income or the broader United Nations Human Development Index, Maltese living standards compare well with those in the richest economies.”

## 'Doing' Anthropological Research

In June 2017 I spent three weeks as a student research participant in the *Off the Beaten Track Anthropology Field School* which is conducted by the Belgian organisation "Expeditions, Research in Applied Anthropology." This school has been operating since 2006, offering students the opportunity to experience field work on the Maltese island of Gozo (Off the Beaten Track, n.d.). Gozo in the height of summer was a vibrant and busy place with market stalls, outdoor dining, and retail stalls all busy making the most of the tourist season. My initial impression as I travelled around the villages and observed the way of life in outdoor spaces such as in the piazzas and walkways, was that there appeared to be a disproportionate number of older adults, in relation to other visible age groups, possibly a mix of locals and tourists-living or holidaying on this "island in the sun." I was yet to learn of the cross-national relationships between Malta and the UK and its influences on the retirement flow of UK ex-pats to Gozo.

As an Australian in my early fifties, I was interested in the topic of ageing and assumed that maintaining independence and productivity were universal goals we all aspired to as we age. As I began to consider macro-level issues concerning demographic ageing through a micro-ethnographic and self-narrative lens I uncovered my own culturally infused neoliberal ideals around "active ageing." These perspectives repeatedly clashed with those of my respondents who rejected any notion of selfhood that tied their identities to a demographic age group or to any notions of success around productive activity and independence. Instead, respondents valued a safe and relaxed lifestyle and intergenerational societal and familial relationships. My aim is to highlight the ways individual notions of personhood unsettle the neoliberal and universalistic claims inherent in the current active ageing paradigm because many people do not identify as a manageable cohort based on demographic age any more than other demographic age groups might.

## "Successful Ageing" and "Active Ageing" Concepts

The activity perspective predominates both the successful and active ageing models and stems from gerontology, a multi-disciplinary field concerned with ageing practices and policies as well as ageing processes from individual and societal perspectives (biomedical, psycho-social, and socio-economic) (McDaniel, 2008). In the late 1980s physician John Rowe and psychologist Robert Kahn suggested that successful ageing involved maintaining full function as closely as possible to the end-of-life stage (Rowe & Kahn, 1987). This notion of "successful ageing" has largely dominated the United States (U.S.) model of ageing, with achievement based on clinical and medical criteria which assumes full health in old age (Foster & Walker, 2015). This model is embedded in biomedical discourse around health and what it means to age well and because biomedicine is "a field particularly prone to be viewed as culture free," it is not generally acknowledged as having cultural and ideological foundations (Lamb, 2014, p. 42). The successful ageing model has been critiqued for neglecting to account for how people view themselves as successful and for its nar-

row focus on how people should age according to individual choice, irrespective of structural conditions which impact ageing (Foster & Walker, 2021).

Cross-cultural studies have highlighted differences in ageing concepts and notions of personhood to reveal the biopolitical and cultural nature of the successful ageing model (Corwin, 2020; Lamb, 2014). For example, in Lamb's (2014, p. 46) study of U.S. elders, her respondents had embraced the "successful" ageing paradigm in everyday practice and were proud to define themselves as "successfully ageing or ageing well" as acknowledged in their descriptions of their extensive activities which reflected their mental and physical independence. In contrast, her extensive studies in India revealed that, "talk of readiness for death and acceptance of decline" prevailed in the dominant discourse amongst older Indians and there was "the absence of a dedication to independence, and to physical and mental exercise" (Lamb, 2014, p. 42). Cultural differences have also been identified in studies of U.S. Franciscan Catholic nuns who have overall been found to experience less emotional and physical pain in later life than their lay counterparts, prompting a recent study to examine why they have "been heralded as models of successful ageing" (Corwin, 2020, p. 639). Corwin (2020, p. 639) suggests that far from espousing the expectations of the "successful ageing" paradigm, these women were living longer, healthier, and more active lives because of "their radical acceptance of their own and others' chronic conditions and decline when they do occur." It is their acceptance of debility which sets them apart from their counterparts and highlights the culturally embedded notions inherent in the mainstream model of "successful ageing."

The concept of "active ageing" features most prominently in European policy frameworks which are aimed at addressing demographic challenges, where the notion of "earned retirement" and its association with being a period of leisure is being replaced by moral imperatives to remain productive and contribute to society (Foster & Walker, 2021, p. 1). Productive, "active ageing" discourse tends to focus on the potential burden of the aged on the rest of society and the future costs predicted from population ageing (Salazar, 2017; Walker, 2008). Malta's active ageing policy incorporates strategies and opportunities aimed at encouraging social participation, from the establishment of day centres and learning centres, to increasing motivation in older adults by noting their needs, addressing barriers to social engagement, and increasing awareness of the benefits of participatory lifestyles (National Commission for Active Ageing, n.d.). Critics have argued that the economic perspective is an intrinsic bias of the active ageing concept, which reflects neoliberal preoccupations with maintaining productivity in later life (Formosa, 2013; Gamble, 2009). They assert that the globalisation of neoliberalism can result in a neglect of cross-cultural perspectives, detracting from a holistic approach which would incorporate other worthwhile pursuits (Formosa, 2013; Lamb, 2014). Trnka & Trundle, 2017 pp.10–11) argue that there is much evidence that refutes the notion of the totalising nature of neoliberal ideas, suggesting that "crosscutting forms of identities and collective and interpersonal ties can sometimes intersect, and at other times contest, neoliberal frames." These critiques prompted me to explore notions of personhood of retirees living in Gozo in relation to culturally infused notions of what active ageing might entail.

Understanding the concept of personhood emerged as an anthropological endeavour in the 1980s and it has been described as "...a category that shifts and moves when we apply the lens of cross-cultural comparison, but it is one that also shifts and moves across the life course within and between cultural settings" (Degnen, 2018, p. 22). Western notions of frailty can call into question notions of personhood where there is a distinction between the autonomous independent, rational old age or "healthy old age" and age experienced in the various manifestations of debility (Degnen, 2018, p. 153). Individualist notions of personhood value the avoidance of decline and have been identified as a particularly Western notion of what it means to age well (Lamb, 2014).

From a public health perspective, neoliberal ideology leans towards encouraging older adults to become "entrepreneurs" in a capitalist economy, by identifying as either workers or volunteers, and behave according to the ideals of economic markets (Formosa, 2013b). Malta's first active ageing policy indeed aspired to create opportunities for "continuous and active participation of older persons in social, economic, cultural and civic affairs" (National Commission for Active Ageing, n.d., p. 42). The strategy to encourage participation is based on the notion that in the past, cultural attitudes towards ageing resulted in the opposite, by ascribing aged people "a passive role characterised by a decline in health, income and social networking" (National Commission for Active Ageing, n.d., p.42). Holstein & Minkler (2003, p. 791) however challenge the normative view that participation equals "successful" ageing, by asking how it would feel to judge another life stage such as childhood or midlife as successful "because the person rarely became ill and participated in many social events." Their critical approach to the successful ageing paradigm raises the concern that "many older people try to become what culture signals as desirable without always recognizing where the pressures originate and even if those efforts are ultimately self-defeating" (Holstein & Minkler, 2003, p. 788). Katz (2000, p. 139) highlights a 1920s research study of older adults conducted by Stanley Hall which revealed how "meanings associated with contemplation and rest" were accompanied by an absence of attention to "activity schedules or lifestyle standards." Katz (2000, p. 140) suggests that such notions attached to meaning making in old age were eventually replaced in the post war period by an ideology that shifted from the focus from contemplative pursuits in old age to one that problematised adjustment to old age and promoted the ideal of activity where "elements of everyday existence are converted into activities." Given the prevalence of the active aging paradigm in Maltese policy, these critiques urge us to ask which understandings of ageing exist among older people themselves, and to what extent notions of activity and productivity prevail. Exploring the perspectives of Gozitan-born and UK expat retirees living in Gozo, I argue that retirees in this study collectively valued "living" as opposed to "ageing," and their perceptions of ageing challenged the culturally infused assumptions embedded in the active ageing model. Acknowledging different personal perspectives on ageing allowed me to explore what Kenyon & Randall (1999, p. 1) highlight as being intrinsic to investigating the ageing process: the understanding of adults through the exploration of narrative perspectives or "life as *story*." By researching how older people feel about their own ageing process this experience revealed to me the underlying

humanity of individuals and allowed me to compare this with concepts embedded in the active ageing paradigm.

## Methods

As a student anthropologist I was keen to embark on this activity called “field-work,” not realising I was about to experience a lesson in reflexivity. Originally, I had planned to research perspectives of ageing with elders living in a nursing home. On my initial visit to a care facility however I was soon disappointed to be told that I would need to undertake a time-consuming screening program before being allowed to meet with what the manager described as their “most vulnerable people.” With limited time on the island (three weeks) I realised this was impossible and after thanking the manager for his honesty, I wandered into a nearby coffee shop to contemplate my research dilemma. Almost immediately I struck up a conversation with some UK expats sitting nearby who were eager to share that they had recently retired and moved to Gozo. I wondered why people would leave their homeland at this time in their lives. I had just stumbled on a potential new line of enquiry and this conversation influenced my decision to investigate what I was told was a large UK expat retiree community living in Gozo. To complement this, I chose to research the perceptions of retired Gozitans, with a view to forming some potential cross-cultural comparisons about attitudes towards ageing. At this point I moved to a more ‘opportunistic’ style of ethnographic research rather than focusing on ageing in care homes to guide my fieldwork experience. Throughout the data collection phase this research aim was revised to consider both groups as one representation of retiree ageing concepts. These experiences taught me first-hand the importance of remaining reflexive about where ethnographic research might lead.

My personal perspectives around ageing can be attributed in part to my own demographic age and living in a society where many adults actively choose to manage their retirement years in specialised accommodation such as retirement villages. Many Australians also make the decision to place their parents in nursing homes and it is often perceived as a necessity, particularly if adults are deemed in need of specialised care<sup>2</sup>. As I grow older, I have become more aware of my own ageing self and what my own future might encompass. I was eager to explore how people in Gozo felt about the concept of ageing and I had assumed that people would be willing to discuss their ageing plans with me. My subjective positionality regarding ageing being a manageable entity was repeatedly challenged by my respondents in the field who rejected all notions of themselves as ageing. This experience allowed me to take a critical approach to my positionality, or as Madden (2010, p. 23) suggests, that although one learns more about themselves as “the ethnographer” and the way that can influence research, being reflexive allows us to “create a more reliable portrait, argument or theory about ‘them, the participants.’” Properly confronting my

<sup>2</sup> See Fox. (2005). Cultures of Ageing in Thailand and Australia. (What Can an Ageing Body Do?). *Sociology (Oxford)*, 39(3), 481–498. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505052489> for a discussion on the health and social care framework for older Australians.

own culturally infused notions of ageing enabled me to understand alternate perspectives. Another problem encountered in the ethnographic landscape is the tendency to “generalize inappropriately from the particular” (LeCompte, 1987, p. 46). In the context of my observations, it is important to note that they be taken as occurring at that point in time from my lens of experience and not necessarily a representation of the entire reality of what ageing might mean to Gozitans.

My research took place in public spaces such as on buses, in piazzas and public walkways, as many people were out during the daytime enjoying the Mediterranean summer. Other sites were restaurants and coffee shops, and I was also invited to two private homes where I engaged in participant observation and informal unstructured interviews. I complemented this with one formal in-depth interview with a UK male respondent, which focused on key questions around life values.

There are several limitations of this study, one being the limited time spent in the field. Although traditionally ethnographies are long term endeavours, many are much shorter, and may be multi-sited or focus on a single element (Madden, 2010). One of the aims of this exploratory study was to accept the limitations of time and highlight instead, the nature of ethnographic enquiry which seeks to understand and “...appreciate what it means to be human in particular social and cultural contexts” (Madden, 2010, p. 17). A further limitation was the small sample size and the exclusion of other representatives of the ageing cohort which were not presented to me in the field, such as those over seventy-five, or potentially isolated, vulnerable and/or disadvantaged retirees including some who might be considered “frail older adults” or infirm, non-English speaking, or a separate case study of retirees returning to Gozo which would have been equally worthy of enquiry. Utilising this method meant that the people represented in my study were those who were publicly available by the sheer fortune of me meeting them in my travels, and their subsequent invitations for me to visit their private homes. The aim of this paper is to influence further discussion and provide a “snapshot” of ageing perspectives which disrupt the prevailing active ageing paradigm. Further ethnographic research into how older adults living in Gozo define themselves and seek meaning in their lives, can provide valuable information to policy makers that seek to define and manage them.

Participant observation encompasses understanding and exploring ways in which individuals manifest their explicit culture in social settings (Bernard, 2006). As my research question sought to understand ageing concepts in a short time span, it was a strategic method for gathering data from informal conversations by “...stalking culture in the wild—establishing rapport and learning to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up” (Bernard, 2006, p. 312). As Gozo is a small island many people became accustomed to my presence in the areas I frequented and were happy to assist me in my research and discuss their life experiences. Much of my time was spent conducting unstructured interviews on buses and whilst walking down to the bay with a respondent for example, gaining in-depth insights and writing up notes later. My age and Australian accent influenced the accessibility of respondents willing to discuss their daily life experiences with me. Being English speaking, for instance, made it easy to strike up conversations with UK ex-pats living on Gozo, and talking with Gozitan-born locals revealed the strong connection Maltese people have with Australia. Coupled with rising unemployment rates, better



economic conditions abroad, and assisted package agreements, many Maltese (young males in particular) emigrated to countries such as the U.K. and Australia during the 1950s (Galizia, 2017; Warnes & Patterson, 1998), some of whom had now returned.

Respondents were aged between fifty-four and seventy-four years of age and verbally consented to being interviewed. In total, qualitative data were obtained from discussions with fifteen UK expat retirees and twelve Gozitan born retirees, with an even mix of male and female respondents. All names have been changed for privacy. To satisfy ethical requirements, whenever I met with potential respondents, I would explain that I was a student researcher from the anthropology field school stationed on the island exploring the concept of ageing, before gaining permission from them to assist me with my research.

I documented all dialogic discourse resulting from unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and examined my data for regularities and patterns, isolating general themes for later analysis. Levy & Hollan (2014) suggest that when conducting person centred ethnographies, it is important to represent the subject's perspectives and distance oneself from assuming their motivations. Writing up life stories involved a process of systematically revisiting the data to generate insights about ageing perspectives whilst simultaneously remaining attentive to my own cognitive biases based on personal lived experiences of ageing. Through a process known as "narrativizing" the participants the findings represent a storied reality "based in observed facts" (Madden, 2010, p.159).

### Discussing ageing: from passive to active

*"What do I think about ageing? I don't think about it! It's a natural part of life!"*  
– Steven, a UK expat who chose to retire in Gozo.

One of the initial surprises during fieldwork was the reluctance of anyone to discuss their "ageing" with me. Asking "how do you feel about ageing?" or "what do you think about ageing?" invariably resulted in non-recognition, such as in the quote from Steven above. Steven was a UK expat I met whilst out walking one day. He had decided Gozo was the best place for him to live once his UK business had been sold. He told me he loved the laid-back lifestyle in Gozo and spent many hours chatting and laughing with tourists and locals he met in public. Whilst agreeing to discuss his lifestyle choices with me he strongly resisted discussion aimed at his age. The point he made was that he did not think of himself as ageing; life was just to be lived and not separated into this category. This type of response was to repeat itself with remarkable consistency. For instance, sharing morning tea inside the home of Gozitan retirees Peter and Maria, I asked, "how do you feel about ageing?" only to be greeted by their blank faces. Could it be that I was asking about the oldest people in their neighbourhood? I could see that they were truly baffled about this notion of "ageing." After a long pause they tried to assist me with this curious research, by telling me about a blind relative in their village who lived with her niece and was one hundred and one years of age. Maria then pointed out that one of the older men in her village will get up each morning and sit at the other end of the street to watch the

daily activities of the village before returning home at midday. They went on to speak of all the other people in their street who were over ninety years of age. These stories were offered to me as entirely normal accounts of life in their village; there was nothing remarkable to them about so many older adults living there. It was clear to me that Peter and Maria did not generally think of their neighbours and family members in terms of their ages, however judging by their seriousness (and confusion), they were trying hard to help this eager looking student researcher sitting at their kitchen table as much as they could. What surprised me most, however, was their reluctance to discuss or consider ageing in relation to their selves. None of the Gozitan retirees I spoke with identified as ageing. Otto, a retired Gozitan who had agreed to assist me with my research laughed when I disclosed that no-one wanted to discuss their ageing with me, telling me “none of us ever do!”

Initially I did not have a sense of the socio-cultural reality I had entered, and my questioning style reflected my own cultural assumptions that ageing was a discrete entity. Ageing as a concept was not something readily understood at any age of life by members of this community and growing older was not readily discussed. Concepts of personhood were not attached to markers of age such as debility or decline, nor were they attached to notions of resisting ageing processes through engagement in activities. My taken for granted assumptions were repeatedly challenged in this foreign context, a regular phenomenon in ethnography which has been highlighted by Fry (2010) as “cultural shock,” when the researcher must distance themselves emotionally and intellectually from previous taken for granted assumptions. In hindsight I might have achieved more favourable responses about ageing had I worded my question as “how do you feel about getting older?” I soon learned to converse about anything *but* ageing to discover more about how retirees defined themselves and what they valued in life.

My second line of enquiry was to understand what activities might be important to retirees. As I travelled through various villages, I observed many groups of older Gozitan-born men chatting and laughing in public meeting places such as the piazzas, before going home for lunch and a siesta- a cultural tradition whereby most businesses close at midday for a few hours and people retreat home to eat and rest (see Huck 2018). I had previously discussed Gozitan activities with Otto and he offered me his description of what a typical retired Gozitan man’s day might involve: early morning church worship, home for breakfast, then back to the piazza to meet with other men from the village and then home in the heat of the day for a siesta or nap. I wondered if Otto was generalising too much about Gozitan male retiree lifestyles. Although Otto was committed to volunteer tourism activities, he explained to me that there was no social pressure to remain active by participating in volunteer work or keep working. I began to understand that notions of personhood were not attached to what one had achieved in the past or what one was achieving (or doing) in the present. I found all retired people (Gozitans and expats) I spoke with recounted stories of their daily life in a surprisingly matter of fact manner.

I met Ken, who told me he was a UK expat and a “boatie” and when I asked what a “boatie” did he answered “drink and sail around. It’s just what I do.” I wondered if high socio-economic status was a common thread for most expats and this might be the reason they could live here in retirement. On another occasion Dave had told me

that he spends his days socialising and “helps out” at the local dive shop “if they need me, but I don’t want to work too hard.” This question as to whether economic status might shape experiences of ageing was clarified by Suzie at the ex-pat social gathering I attended. Suzie told me that one of the reasons Gozo is so attractive is that the lifestyle was so much more affordable<sup>3</sup>. She told me, “we were under stress because of our high living expenses, and we never saw our families. We actually see more of our families now than when we were at home [UK], because we don’t have to work so hard, and we can be available for them.” Sally added, “we have more leisure and travel time, and everyone is only three hours away anyway.” Many in the expat community told me that what they liked about their lives was that without financial pressures they could afford to retire and enjoy the pursuit of leisurely activities such as wood turning, and other arts and crafts. For many I observed and spoke with, life was lived at a leisurely pace; there were strong social connections and one had time to pursue sedentary activities. Far from missing the “productivity” of the UK, these expats explained that they had moved to Gozo in retirement for their own wellbeing, in pursuit of a more sedentary life and one in which they could spend more time with family. These perspectives conflicted with neoliberal notions of “active or successful ageing” through continued economic productivity as a meaningful goal in later life. What the expats had come to realise was that continued economic activity was more about the high cost of living in the UK and needing to remain productive, and much less about their own wellbeing.

## Social Connections and Gozitan Sociability

During my stay I came across several Gozitan men who had lived in Australia and, after recognising my Australian accent, were eager to discuss their experiences in my country of origin. Several informants recounted how happy they were to be back living in Gozo in retirement. The men I met all spoke favourably of living on Gozo and shared memories of a much poorer and harsher life on the island in their youth. Many men shook their heads and recalled the times when there was little work available, and food was scarce. Marco explained, “life in Gozo now is very different, it is much better now.” Some of these men had originally taken advantage of the 1950s assisted migration policies and spent their working lives in Australia<sup>4</sup>. One such man Charlie, told me that he preferred to be back in his village now where he could go hunting for rabbits or birds, and fishing without everything being so far away from home such as in Australia. Dino, another man who had “come home,” told me how he felt sorry for some of his Gozitan friends living in Australia who told him they wanted to retire back in Gozo for the lifestyle, but their wives would not leave their extended families in Australia. Migration decisions made in the 1950s meant that for some the attrac-

<sup>3</sup> The average cost of living in Malta is 30% less expensive than living in the UK (see <https://livingcost.org/cost/malta/united-kingdom>, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> See Galizia (2017) *The Economy of Modern Malta: From the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan regarding the effects of World War II on Malta’s food shortages and economic instability”.

tions of retirement on Gozo were harder to attain due to these kinship networks. I got the impression that growing old on Gozo (at least for these return male migrants) was preferable to their adopted countries no matter how long one had lived abroad. Nothing was too far away on Gozo, and they valued the importance of daily social connections with each other. Seeing a Gozitan man happily picking wild capers by the side of a road, which he was taking home to pickle, moreover, made me think of how and by whom something is defined as productive or for that matter, successful or not.

My two initial expat acquaintances had also told me that they had deliberately come to Gozo to be part of the friendship networks in the large expat retiree community. Following that meeting, I had determined to explore why others had left the UK to retire permanently on Gozo. I met John on one of my walks and we struck up many conversations over the next few days. John eventually agreed to a more formal in-depth interview about my topic. John was a seventy-three-year-old UK expat who has resided permanently on Gozo since his fifties. I had the pleasure of conducting an interview with him in a local café he frequented daily. At the beginning of our interview, I endeavoured to create rapport by sharing a personal observation that I thought John looked much younger than his seventy-three years. He replied that without a doubt his good health was due to the high quality and availability of fresh food, particularly the fish and the bread. He also felt that the weather was ideal for older age stating, “a little bit of heat keeps your bones regular.” Deflecting my initial attempts to discuss ageing John suggested, “let’s just talk about my life here.” I wondered if being active was important to John, and one of the first things John mentioned was his volunteer work and how much it meant to him. John stressed the importance of being involved with members of his church community, describing to me how enjoyable it was to hand out decorations he had made to the entire congregation, such as at Christmas time, because this role allowed him to be in contact with everyone and catch up with them all. He also recounted how proud he felt at festa time (an annual catholic festival), participating in the official prize-giving ceremonies, and watching all the young children grow up around him each year. He elaborated on his observations of the Gozitan church community stating:

*What’s so nice about the church is that you’ve got teenagers that go, which is rather surprising these days. And what is so good is that youngsters all either play an instrument or play football. I particularly like how all the youngsters get involved.*

Although John did have family in the UK who visited occasionally, he told me: “this is my home; I don’t have any notion to go back to England.” He confided that most of his friends were now Gozitan and many had become like family stating: “we do go out as a family, it’s rather nice.” Although John lived alone, what emerged during our conversation was the value John placed on his intergenerational connections with people in the community through his church involvement and his close sense of belonging with the Gozitan families he knew well. John’s emphasis on his social connections indicated he was happy to belong to a broader mixed community, not segregated by age or defined by his age set. Indeed, research suggests that strong emotional bonds in intergenerational ties are beneficial for physical and psychologi-

cal well-being (Fingerman et al., 2013). Along with the other retirees I spoke to, narratives of daily life were recounted to me as part of a life trajectory of experiences, unsettling the totalising concepts of neoliberal policies with their focus on activity in ageing. I pondered that in many ways these lifestyle behaviours epitomise the aims of the second commitment of Malta's active ageing policy; that of maintaining one's self-worth through active participation in society. Although many of the adults I spoke with were, from an outsider's perspective, embracing the ideals of the active ageing paradigm, they did not attach any notions of personhood to these participatory activities and their social connections, through hobbies, and interests were more important than maintaining productivity.

### **Push and Pull Factors: Comfort, Safety, Homogeneity, and Politics**

The experiences of ageing migrants are well-studied in research into international retirement migration. Innes (2008) for instance uses a life course approach to shed light on migration retirement to purpose-built retirement communities which promote active and successful ageing. In combination with an inquiry into push and pull factors, such studies "demonstrate the complexities of perceptions of place of origin and place of destination" (Innes, 2008, p. 10). Early research into motivations driving international retirement migration (IRM) identified cultural and societal differences in destination countries (Williams et al., 1997). For example, IRM motivations to Malta from the UK were found to be influenced by economic factors as well as a warmer climate and more relaxed lifestyles (Williams et al., 1997). Jenny, an expat I had met on one of my walks, had been living on Gozo for two years and expressed how happy she was with her decision to emigrate. Both Jenny and John mentioned their satisfaction with the Maltese medical care and transport costs which they felt made it easier to live comfortably there on their UK pensions.

Perceptions of their homeland were important for the UK respondents. For many of the expats I spoke to, moving to Gozo was strongly influenced by UK politics, and their views on overcrowded urban spaces and feelings of insecurity in their places of origin ("push" factors). During my chat with John, he told me how he frequented the coffee shop we were sitting in, every morning, and was confident that if he did not turn up the proprietors would know something was wrong and check on him. Over this conversation he revealed how safe he felt within the Gozitan community amongst people that were like family. He contrasted this experience with his retirement years spent in the UK:

*The year and a half I spent in retirement I would see people shoplifting and I came face to face with a burglar one time. He tried to smash my head and it was awful, so I thought I've had enough of that! So that was it, I wanted quality of life and you've got that here.*

He also told me how safe he felt within the Gozitan community amongst people that were "like family." As I got to know John throughout the three weeks, I asked about his family "back home" to which he replied, "Oh they come over and visit sometimes

but they get bored here. You see they are very busy at home, and they don't think there is anything to do in Gozo."

According to Lamb (2015) in countries like the UK and the U.S. although families might offer help to elderly family members the culture idealises the self-reliant individual. Loe (2017, p. 223) suggests that in the U.S. the reliance on independence and individualism (the "successful" ageing paradigm), can be to the individual's detriment as they age because often "[A]t eighty-five and beyond, most of one's peer group is gone, and the potential for isolation, loneliness, and depression is strong. The antidote to loss is new and old connections." John had clearly decided that by living in Gozo he was able to maintain a sense of interdependence by expanding his social networks to find "family," and meet regularly with all the members of his church through his volunteer work.

Disillusionment with the UK social climate and more specifically ethnic diversity was a theme that emerged in the many informal conversations I had with respondents. Jenny echoed John's orientation towards safety and how this had influenced her decision to leave the UK. She had become disillusioned with migration policies in England and felt that her hometown had become overcrowded and had made her feel "less safe."

Likewise, Nick, an expat I met in a shop, spontaneously told me how angry he felt about UK politics:

*Our country is a mess; there are places there too dangerous to go now... We seem to have gotten rid of all trades and artisans, the only plumbers in the UK now come from Poland. They [the UK government] only have two years to sort out this horrific mess [Regarding the government's decision to leave the EU].*

Such passionate responses to the current politics in the UK were quite typical and suggest that the current socio-political climate in the UK, functioned as a push factor for my respondents in their decision to retire on Gozo rather than ageing in their homeland. Loe (2017, p. 219) has highlighted in her analysis of U.S. elders that decisions they made about how and where they lived and how their days were conducted helped her to recognise that "elders, like all of us, are creative problem-solvers, aging and adapting as circumstances shift." The perspective of elders in Loe's (2017) research reflects a concern with "comfortable ageing" and coming to terms with taking each day as it comes.

I discussed pull factors more explicitly during an expat gathering to which I had been invited. Talking with these retirees I was told there was a vibrant community of ex-pats living on Gozo and they often met at the local cafe which specialised in traditional English Sunday roasts. Many mentioned the friendly relationships with Gozitans, who did not seem to be classified as ethnically different. My respondents generally perceived more ethnic homogeneity in Gozo compared to the UK, as expressed by Gary: "Malta and England are allies, they like us." Another woman Sally winked at me and said, "Gozo finds you!" Everyone I spoke to told me how comfortable and safe it was to live in Gozo and connect with other expats living here and no-one I met had regretted their decision to leave the UK.

My experience with U.K. expats and Gozitan-born locals taught me that visions of personhood did not centre around productivity, activity, and autonomy. Instead, these retirees valued their sociality in a safe environment amongst trusted community members and they saw this as being intrinsic to their lives as they aged. Rather than seeing themselves as “productive” or “active,” these retirees valued social connections and leisure time as much as they valued any “activity-based” pursuits. The message I received repeatedly in my interrogations of retiree life was that life was to be lived, not managed according to any moral dictates or age specific guidelines.

## Conclusion

This study set out to understand concepts of ageing as reflected by Gozitan-born and UK expat retirees living on Gozo and investigate how these notions align with underlying ideals in the active ageing paradigm. The active ageing paradigm, with its focus on productivity, activity and independence in later life has been critiqued for its neoliberal preoccupations with maintaining productivity throughout the life stage (Formosa, 2013; Gamble, 2009). Critics argue that this model offers a normative expectation of how to age “actively” according to the dictates of ageing policies, and as such neglects understandings of ageing as experienced by older people themselves. I discovered that respondents in my study did not identify with an ageing cohort, choosing to see themselves as “living” successfully rather than “ageing” successfully. Respondents’ notions of personhood did not align with the active ageing model and whilst various activities were valued such as volunteer work, hunting and fishing, socializing and church worship, these behaviours were not attached to specific notions of successful ageing through activity-based pastimes. This differs markedly from Lamb’s (2014) study of US elders who consciously embraced many of the ideals of the active ageing paradigm and linked these activities with perceptions of themselves as ageing successfully.

As active (and successful) ageing discourse gains dominance in policy commitments designed to combat the demographic shifts in ageing societies, one of the consequences of these models is that our ideas of what a successful human being is, are being culturally shaped (Lamb, 2014). Yet the older adults I met living in Gozo not only actively refused to discuss their ageing as a category but did not attribute any of their daily activities with notions of personhood. Core values favoured by adults in this study instead concentrated on the importance of safety and intergenerational social and familial relationships. These findings correlate with research that reveals the active ageing paradigm is based on a specific set of situated, biopolitical and cultural constructions of success, wellbeing, and old age (Formosa, 2013; Lamb, 2014). As Lamb (2014, p. 41) cautions, attaching notions of success to the ageing process can become counterproductive, particularly when the normal conditions of infirmity and decline can be interpreted as “‘failures’ in living well.” Although arguably the retirees I interviewed performed activities which at times aligned with some of the elements of a more comprehensive approach to active ageing, my research highlighted how retirees did not identify with “active ageing” discourse or notions of being part of an ageing cohort. The older adult respondents I spoke with have much to

teach us therefore about accepting ageing as part of life, whatever may come within the daily limitations and opportunities a passive or active lifestyle brings with it.

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