



Logan Roy in *Succession* embodies the many complexities and contradictions of ageing

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Globally successful television shows rarely feature an older person as the main character. Widely acclaimed American series, *Succession* though, recently voted the 11th best television show of all time [1], revolves around Logan Roy, a self-made billionaire approaching his 80th birthday and impending retirement as chief executive of a large multi-media conglomerate. As Roy's four children jostle to secure their position as the next chief executive of the company, *Succession* has been celebrated for compellingly depicting the burden of wealth and greed, the corrupting nature of power, and the scourge of societal inequality, but it also credibly captures some of the complexities of ageing.

An unhelpful, yet unfortunately often-held view of later life is that it is marked only by a decline in function and abilities. Like popular culture and literature in general, medical literature over-emphasises this 'Loss' model of ageing, probably reflecting the fact we mostly encounter older people when they are unwell. While it is true that certain cognitive abilities decline with age, strategic decision-making often improves as we get older, where insight and wisdom can be leveraged to make better decisions [2]. Nobody demonstrates this better than Roy, who draws on accumulated experience and acumen to remain a step ahead of his business rivals, and indeed his family when they plot against him. While it is clear certain aspects of his cognition have waned, he uses insight and an ability to 'read the room' to frequently manipulate those around him. Roy foils plans to oust him as a chief executive officer during a surprise no-confidence motion with bluster and persuasion, targeting each board members weaknesses to turn the tide, and the vote, in his

favour ('If you move against me, I'll put a hole in the back of your ... head').

Logan Roy also demonstrates other under-appreciated qualities that people often gain as they get older. He is remarkably adaptable and pragmatic, diversifying his business into internet technology as interest in traditional media declines. He is searingly honest, and he is liberatingly unburdened by other's opinions of him.

It is also true, however, that Roy is not invulnerable to some of the challenges of later life. In the very first episode he suffers a potentially catastrophic intracerebral haemorrhage, rendering him aphasic. While initially, the prognosis looks bleak, Roy recovers and gradually learns to speak and walk again. It is assumed he will then hand over his business but his first act on regaining speech is to rebuke his son's business decisions while he has been incapacitated. Roy also has troublesome urinary incontinence. Later he develops delirium in the context of a probable urinary tract infection and on the eve of a major shareholder meeting, leading to potentially erratic decision-making and visual hallucinations, with several scenes delineating the difficulties families endure when seeing their father or husband in the midst of delirium.

A further challenge faced by Roy is ageism. Roy's character certainly bucks the current trend in the world of business, where the average chief executive officer in the United States is almost 30 years his junior. Perhaps it is not surprising then that the business world is depicted as hostile to older people, with Roy being labelled a 'dinosaur' by one of his younger rivals, and consistently facing claims, particularly from within his own family, that he is out of touch with modern life. He becomes especially frustrated when others inform him of what the world is like nowadays, responding with 'Don't tell me about people—I'd go flat broke in a week if I didn't know people'. Despite this, however, Roy exhibits ageist tendencies himself, describing an older female colleague as 'a thousand years old', and seems at times to resent getting older, dryly referring to his birthday party as

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an ‘*accumulation*’ rather than a celebration. This highlights the paradox that internalised ageism is often more prevalent among older people than we expect, particularly amongst those with frailty and multimorbidity, [3] who are in return more likely to be the victims of ageism themselves. It brings to mind infrequent conversations we have with older people in the acute hospital who decline transfer to a specialist geriatric ward, and this deprives themselves of care shown to improve outcomes, as they don’t want to be co-located with fellow older patients.

While we may applaud Roy overcoming these challenges of later life, we also must recognise that he can be deeply unpleasant. This is probably best shown when he asks his grandson to taste his dinner first, as he was concerned somebody was trying to poison him! He is ruthless (*‘You’ve got to be a killer!’*) and he is motivated primarily by greed and revenge, regularly engaging in acts of infidelity and cruelty. His relationship with his son Kendall is particularly complicated, referring to him as *‘curdled cream’* and *‘not made for this world’* and that he would *‘grind his bones to make bread’*. This unpleasantness also speaks to the great inter-individual variability we see in Geriatric Medicine, however. We truly are born as copies yet die as originals [4], with life experiences shaping us to the point that the spectrum of personalities and characters we encounter in the day-to-day care of older people is so broad and rich. This contrasts sharply with the all-too frequent media portrayal of older people as a homogeneous group, characterised frequently by vulnerability and dependency [5]. This is also seen frequently in commercially used stock images of older people [6]. It is refreshing then to see a robust, assertive octogenarian holding court over his younger rivals, especially as he is truly Machiavellian. The fact that Roy is often dressed stereotypically in knitted cardigans while all this goes on only adds to the entertainment.

Each episode of *Succession* has been watched by over 4 million viewers and in 2021 the show won 19 Emmy Awards. Its creator Jesse Armstrong has been lauded for exploring many complex modern themes. The story it depicts of a powerful patriarch facing scrutiny in later life is

an archetypal one, and can be traced from King Lear right up to the Sopranos. Through Logan Roy, however, it presents an appropriately nuanced picture of ageing. He is resilient but at the same time vulnerable. While some of his powers have waned, others are sharper than ever. He faces constant ageism yet is ageist himself. He can be offensive and unpleasant while also inspiring grudging admiration and respect. Perhaps, then, what *Succession* captures best are the glorious contradictions and complexities of getting older, something that will resonate with anyone involved in the care of older people.

Declarations

Conflict of interests The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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