Journal Pre-proof

Flourishing 'older-old' (80+) adults: personal projects and their enabling places

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Please cite this article as: Jenny Roe , Mark Blythe , Caroline Oliver Dr , Alice Roe , Flourishing 'older-old' (80+) adults: personal projects and their enabling places, *Wellbeing, Space and Society* (2022), doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2022.100072

Highlights

- Older people's final decades can be a period of continuing growth and flourishing.
- This is demonstrated by the richness of their personal projects.
- Older people's personal projects are supported by the context in which they take place.
- Supportive environments include restorative, affinity and flow niches.

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out a framework for exploring flourishing in older age through the lens of what older adults are doing in their lives. Applying a model from positive psychology called personal project analysis (PPA) our study captures a snapshot of older people's goals and their environmental context. Targeting older people aged 80+ we applied PPA methods in a semi-structured interview to elicit participants' personal projects which were scored on eight wellbeing dimensions (e.g., fun, stress). Qualitative data analysis identified what types of personal projects are employed by this older demographic and the environments in which they are carried out. Results showed our participants were vitally engaged in a wide spectrum of projects exercised in a range of 'enabling places' which we categorised as (1) *restorative niches* (places that afford psychological restoration) such as nature settings (e.g. a garden, local park or riverside); (2) *affinity niches* (places that afford social opportunities) such as religious venues, social clubs, or cafés; and (3) *flow niches* (places that afford immersion in mental or physical tasks) such as the home (e.g. the kitchen) or a place associated with a previous career or amateur sport (e.g. cricket club). Our findings are discussed in relation to older people's wellbeing and the role of the built environment. Despite the increasingly negative stereotyping of the 'older-old' our study shows that the final decades of life can be a period of continuing growth and learning, a life stage with its own distinct character, rather than a period of decline.

Keywords: older-old age, personal project, wellbeing, flourishing, restorative niche, enabling resources, affordance

1.0 Introduction

Our global population is ageing rapidly with the 'oldest old' (80 and older) representing the fastest growing demographic (Medical Research Council, 2008). Maintaining and improving older adults' wellbeing is a long-term strategic goal of the UN and the WHO; the recently released UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2020–2030 (WHO, 2020) targets four priority areas for action: ageism, age-friendly communities, long-term care, and delivering integrated, person-centered care. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional sociological challenges including an increase in ageism. Social media and the press have spread negative views of the 'older old' as being helpless, frail, and unable to contribute to society (Ayaon et al., 2021, McCarthy Stone, 2021). But innumerable older persons defy such stereotypical imaging with older adults making valuable contributions to society and enjoying meaningful and fulfilling lives well into their 90s and beyond. Whilst multiple efforts are needed to counteract ageism in society, positive messaging has an important role to play, not least in terms of motivating older adults to engage in cognitive, social, physical and volunteering activities (Dionigi, 2015). Our aim is to contribute to this discourse by presenting positive characterisations of older age that demonstrate how older people are thriving in later life using the lens of their personal projects. In doing so, we show how older age is characterized by purpose and striving rather than simply 'coping' with loss management and frailty.

A secondary aim is to embed understanding of positive ageing in the social and physical contexts in which older people live. It has long been recognized that environmental factors play a significant role in determining health and wellbeing in older age (Rowles and Bernard, 2013).   This is reflected in the WHO Age-friendly Cities and Communities comprehensive framework (WHO, 2007) which includes eight priority environmental domains for action including outdoor spaces and buildings, housing, transportation, and social and civic participation. The place features that support healthy ageing are relatively well evidenced and include walkability, access to open space, easy access to seating, public toilets, and public transit, affordable housing, access to care and social opportunities via access to social and volunteering organisations (Vanleerberghe et al., 2018). However, how these environmental domains interconnect with older people's individual goals and aspirations in later life is less well understood.

In this study we apply Brian Little's (1983) personal project methodology to explore older people's daily goals, strivings, and aspirations with a focus on the consequences for wellbeing and human flourishing, and the social and physical contexts that underpin these goals and outcomes. The method has been adopted in various fields of social, behavioral and health sciences including gerontology (Little et al., 2007). With a view to understanding flourishing in the last decades of life, we deliberately targeted older people who appeared to be thriving well into their eighties and nineties (as perceived by social care support staff who assisted with recruitment). The rationale for this applying this methodology is set out below.

1.1 A social ecological framework for measuring human flourishing

Flourishing is defined in terms of how well people are functioning in relation to their goals, activities, strivings and interactions with the world (Seligman, 2011). It is a multi-faceted construct encompassing affective wellbeing (feelings of joy and pleasure), eudaimonic wellbeing (sense of meaning and purpose in life), evaluative wellbeing (appraisals of quality of life) (Steptoe, 2019) and engagement in the world.

To capture people's interactions with the world, this study uses Brian Little's social ecological model of wellbeing (Little, 1983) which explores how well a person is flourishing in the world through the lens of their personal projects. Little defined personal projects as '*extended sets of personally salient action in context*' (Little, 2007, p. 25) which can range from trivial pursuits (e.g., 'cleaning the kitchen') to more ambitious or spiritual enterprises (e.g. 'improving my relationship with God'). Personal projects are related to other goal concepts that include personal goals (Freund and Riediger, 2006), life tasks (Cantor et al., 1987) and personal strivings (Emmons, 1986) which are similar to — but not synonymous—with personal projects. Personal projects operate in contexts, including physical, social, cultural, and temporal contexts that facilitate or thwart the project's pursuit. Personal Project Analysis (PPA) (Little, 1983) was developed to measure psychometric criteria associated with successful project pursuit (such as manageability, efficacy, support) and capture the dynamic contextual factors that impinge on success, for example, the social context (the 'with whom' of projects) and the place context ('where' a project takes place).

A distinctive feature of personal projects is that they are rooted in this social-ecological context (see Fig 1 below). The place features comprise: (1) the *stable* (or fixed) context features (Box B), for example the bricks and mortar of a home, the spatial layout of a city; and (2) *dynamic* place features (Box D) over which we exercise some choice, for example, the public transit we use to get around town, the neighbourhoods we choose to spend most time in, and which include the affordance feature of place (i.e. the opportunities it offers an individual for action). Similarly, our social context is both fixed (e.g. the organisational context of where we work, the social norms in which we live) and dynamic (e.g. our choice of friends or partners). Although the stable features of our world are difficult to change, our personal contexts are malleable and we can shape our environment to pursue a project more effectively (although our degree of choice will depend on many factors, including economic circumstances). These personal contextual factors work in tandem with individual features, which are also both stable. This includes our fixed personality traits (Box A), and dynamic personal features (i.e. our adaptive character traits, Box C).

A central tenant of Little's model is that personal projects act as a transactional conduit between an individual and their world, and directly and indirectly enhance thriving and flourishing (Little and Belsari-Palsule, 2020) (Box E in Fig 1). How we interact with our personal contexts (our neighbourhood, our family, our circle of friends, our office) - and shape that context - plays a vital role in project success, and in turn, our wellbeing. Our personal projects are only rendered meaningful in terms of their context.
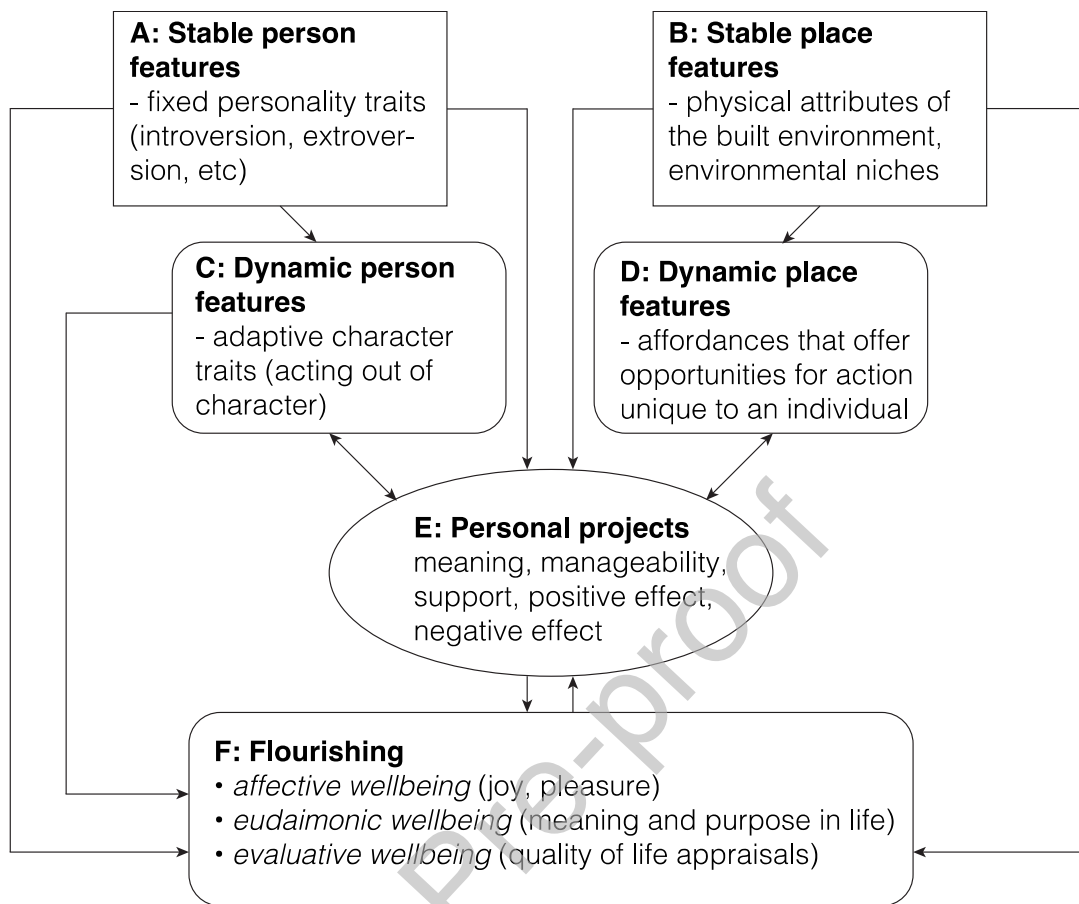
Fig 1: the socio-ecological context of personal projects (adapted from Little, 2020)

This study focuses on the place features of older people's projects, namely Box B and D above.[1]

1.2 What sorts of personal projects are older people engaged in?

In earlier studies, the most common personal goals reported by older people have consistently related to health, family and close relationships, basic daily activities (or maintenance), independent living and leisure activities (Saajanaho et al., 2016, Saajanaho et al., 2014a and 2014b, Lawton et al., 2002). Amongst older people, higher age is associated with fewer personal goals in total (Lawton et al., 2002) and less goal striving, especially in relation to leisure-goals (Lawton et al., 2002). Common goals reported in the 'older-old' include spiritual goals (Lawton et al., 2002), health goals (Smith and Freund, 2002) and goals related to independence and public services (Rapkin and Fischer, 1992). Among older people, recreational or leisure projects have been positively associated with positive affect, and interpersonal projects associated positively with positive affect and negatively with depression (Lawton et al., 2002). Higher levels of engagement with goals have been related to higher wellbeing and quality

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[1] We conceptualize affordances in Little's model as a d*ynamic* relationship between the individual and the physical environment i.e. the opportunities a place affords an individual for action are unique to the individual. We therefore place affordances in Box D (an amendment to the original model).

of life, (Lawton et al., 2002). In summary, the characteristics of old age emerging from the goal-orientated literature indicate a decline in goal striving in the older-old and a turning to spiritual and health-orientated projects.

However, few studies to date have explored the enabling resources associated with goal efficacy in older age. Saajanaho et al., 2016 report the benefit of having good health resources (for example, cognitive ability, walking ability, good perceived general health) in goal efficacy, and the importance of social resources. Living with another person, for example, was associated with a higher number of goals whilst those living alone were more at risk of having no personal goals in their lives. Overall, we found little empirical evidence in the goal literature reporting how physical and social contexts impact goal efficacy in older people.

1.3 The place ecology of personal projects

Wallenius (1999) has studied the inter-relationship between personal projects, wellbeing and physical settings. This study, carried out in adults in their 30s, showed that the perceived supportiveness of the physical environment (mainly the home, workplace, and sports facilities) was associated with more accomplishable projects and quality of life. The place ecology of personal projects has been studied in adolescents from the perspective of restorative niches (Box B, Fig 1), defined by Little as '*the place you go when you want to return to your true self*' (Little et al., 2007). Acting out of character – and against our true character traits – depletes mental and emotional resources and can cause burnout. A restorative niche allows one to recharge from mental fatigue and stress, and nature places have been identified as particularly effective in facilitating this process (Roe and Aspinall, 2012).

We are aware of only a handful of studies that have explored the place ecology of personal projects in older people. Sugiyama and Ward Thompson (2007), for example, have shown which features of neighbourhood environments support older people's outdoor activity projects. These features include access to services, residential density, land-use mix, street connectivity, aesthetics, street trees, the quality of footpaths and traffic, the availability of seating and public bathrooms, and vitality and the presence of other people. Nature-related projects (e.g. walking in nature, gardening) have also been more highly correlated with life satisfaction in older age (Curl et al., 2016). In summary, there is some limited evidence to indicate that the supportiveness of physical and social settings plays a role in project accomplishment and associated wellbeing outcomes. Whilst thousands of personal project data stored in Little's SEA bank (Social Ecological Assessment Bank) has undergone meta-analyses, to date this has focused on the relation between project appraisals and wellbeing (Little and Gee 2007) and not on the place ecology of personal projects.

1.4 Aim of Study
The present study is the third in a series which have taken different approaches to exploring human flourishing in older people. The first of these studies used grounded theory to derive wellbeing themes amongst thriving older people (e.g. attitudes, social and family ties, challenges, agency and "little worlds") and to illustrate the findings using design fictions (Blythe et al., 2015); the second study focused on homophily and the social dynamics of age-segregated environments (Oliver et al., 2018). The aim of the present study is to explore flourishing in older people aged 80+ through the lens of their personal projects and the places that support them. In do so, our hope was to challenge ageist stereotypes of older people.

Whilst there are some studies exploring the contribution of the 'supportiveness of the neighbourhood environment' (SNO) on adult project systems (Curl et al., 2016; Sugiyama and Ward Thompson, 2007) there is very limited evidence of the types of place niches that support the successful pursuit of projects in older age, and, in turn, their impact on wellbeing. Owing to this gap in evidence, we did not form any a priori hypotheses but posited the following research questions:

(1) What sorts of project pursuits characterise older-old age?
(2) How are these pursuits associated with wellbeing?
(3) What are the environmental niches associated with these projects, i.e. what places support project pursuit in older-old age?

2.0 Methods

2.1 Personal projects

Personal projects are captured using a multi-modular instrument that can be adapted to suit a particular project or demographic (Little and Coulombe, 2015). The current version of PPA comprises seventeen dimensions that capture what people think (cognitive dimensions) and feel (affective dimensions) about their projects, alongside the physical and social context associated with these projects. Based on prior empirical factor analysis, five themes have been identified from these dimensions that are highly correlated to wellbeing: the extent to which individual projects are appraised as high on *meaning* (consistent with an individual's self-identity and core values), *manageability* (the expectation that a project is going to be successful), *connected with others* (this includes a project's visibility, importance as viewed by others, support from others), and that generate more *fun* and are *less stressful* (Little et al., 2007).

Project rating can be carried out using the full instrument (i.e. seventeen dimensions), or by collectively rating the entire project system using a validated singular, global scale that captures the five wellbeing dimensions listed above (Pychyl and Little, 1988). For this study, we utilized the latter instrument described further under Procedure below.

2.2 Recruitment: We targeted individuals aged 80 plus who self-identified as being happy. In the context of flourishing, we define happiness as experiencing positive wellbeing combined with a sense that one's life is meaningful and worthwhile (see section 1.1). We used a combination of targeted sampling and snowballing techniques in order to recruit thriving individuals. Some participants were approached via stakeholders delivering care for older people in the community (e.g. day care, pensioners' centre) and in institutions where strong communities might be expected - a convent, a Jewish care home, a residential home for retired actors, for example. Within specific care contexts, we met with care managers and asked them to identify thriving individuals. This resulted in a sample of 14 older adults (mean age 85.6) with varying socio-economic circumstances. Demographic information is presented in Table 1.

2.3 Procedure

Participants self-selected to the study, that is, they explicitly chose to participate after being identified as a potential recruit by an agency (or care home) of which they were a member, and once further information had been provided by the research team. Informed and signed consent was a requirement

to take part. Ethical approval for the study was provided by University of York Academic Ethics and Compliance Committee.

All participants were interviewed in their homes or in care homes or daycare centres by prior arrangement. The interview was recorded and took between 1 to 2 hours to complete.

First, using PPA methods (Little, 1983), interviewers elicited participants' personal projects. The aim was not to elicit a specific number or projects but to let the conversation flow, including reflections on earlier memories and routines. The following question was used in the interview:

> *"Most of us have activities or goals that we think about and plan. We call these personal projects. Some people think of them as a list of things to do. They might be big or small, done with people or alone, done frequently or just once in a while, something you plan to do tomorrow, or in the future.Could you start by telling me what to you do on a day to day, and week to week basis?"*

Once one project was elicited the interviewer would probe the social and physical context of a project (*"Who do you go/do this with?"*, *"Where do you go do to this?"*,*"How long have you been doing this particular project?")* repeating for each project elicited.

Following the interview, the participant was asked to appraise their projects verbally on eight cognitive and affective dimensions using the singular project rating scale (Little, 1988) (see Appendix 1) using the following question:

> *"Now I'm going to ask you to give me some numbers that indicate how you're feeling about your projects as a whole. So all the activities that you've just talked about, think about them as if they are all in one big basket together, and I'm going ask you to rate them on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being a low score, and 10 being a high score. So, the first question is, how meaningful are these projects for you? A score of 1 being not meaningful at all through to 10 being highly meaningful to you."*

This question was then repeated for the other seven dimensions in Little's scale: importance, joy, hope, efficacy, difficulty, stress, and benefits to others (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the scale).

2.4 Data analysis

2.4.1 Qualitative data

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A content analysis (Joffe and Yardley, 2003; Bauer, 2000) was conducted to identify the types of projects and the personal contexts associated with these projects replicating methods previously used in PPA (Little and Coulcome, 2015). A deductive approach to coding the data was applied, using a prescribed coding framework derived from earlier research.

Project types were coded into ten categories: Intrapersonal (relationship with self); Interpersonal (relationship with another); Societal (helping other people or a cause); Financial; Sport/Health; Advancement (e.g. of a skill); Maintenance (of self or another); Hobby; Autonomy; and New Experiences (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009).

Project places were coded using a combination of deductive and inductive methods. First, drawing on earlier research methods (Roe and Aspinall, 2012) we coded restorative niches, defined as places where participants went for peace and quiet to carry out a particular project. However, it became evident that the range of environmental niches supporting projects extended beyond restorative niches. We therefore advanced the taxonomy to include two further niche types that were derived from the data - 'flow niches' and 'affinity niches'. 'Flow niches' were defined as the places we go to build or enact our projects, or a place that facilitates accomplishment and efficacy in advancing a project. 'Flow niches' offer what Csikszentmihalyi (2002) defined as a state of 'flow', a state of full absorption and an immersion in something. 'Affinity niches' were defined as the places in which we 'broaden and build' our socially-orientated projects and our relationships with people and are places to 'be with' people.

In summary, project places were classified into three types of environmental niche: restorative niches (where participants went for psychological escape); flow niches (places that facilitate the advancement and efficacy of a project); and affinity niches (where participants went to connect with other people and/or a type of culture (e.g. sports, religious, culture of descent).

Once the data had been coded, relative frequency scores were calculated per participant for each project type and place, following methods in the literature (Nurmi et al., 1995, Roe and Aspinall, 2012, Wallenius, 1999) A relative frequency captures the number of times a coded project or place occurs compared to the total number of projects (or places) mentioned by the person. For example, the project frequency was calculated by dividing the number of times a particular project category was mentioned by the total number of projects generated by the person, using the formula below. The higher the relative frequency, the higher a particular project features in an individual's project system. Given the small sample (n=14) we did not explore statistical differences by gender or ethnicity.

Relative project frequency = frequency of coded project
                                         sum of all projects

2.4.2 Project appraisal (quantitative data)

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the eight project dimensions for the sample. Analyses were conducted in SPSS.

3.0 Results

3.1 Demographics

Demographics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant demographics (n=14)		
	Number	**% of sample**
Gender		
Female	9	64%
Male	5	36%
Age	85.6 (mean)	
Ethnicity		

|		
White British	12	86%
African-Caribbean	2	14%
Living arrangements		
Living independently at home	8	58%
Living in care	4	28%
Convent	2	14%
Regional spread		
London & SE	6	58%
N.E. England	8	42%

3.2 Project Types

The types of projects that the participants described are shown in table 2 with examples.

Table 2: Project type	Examples elicited from participants
1. Intrapersonal (self-and/ or ideological goals)	Getting used to living on my own after the death of my partner; deepening my relationship with God; being at peace with myself; quietening the inner chatter; coming to terms with the future (e.g. the prospect of care).
2. Interpersonal (social)	Managing differences of opinion with my daughter; caring for my partner; telephoning friends/family; discussing a world issue with my church group; looking for new ways to connect with people; spending time with my cats; chatting with my neighbours on my landing; chatting with fellow residents in the restaurant (care home); going to the club with x
3. Societal (helping others)	Running a hospital stall for a cancer charity; making flower baskets for neighbours/friends; building refurbishment for church / societal club; fixing someone's roof; doing odd jobs for neighbours; laying down things for the future (e.g. planting of an orchard at convent); knitting/sewing/baking for community; running errands for others; cooking meals/cakes for the Darby & Joan club and older people in need; calling out the Bingo numbers; sending people a card if they are unwell; directing a local charity; passing on a skill.
4. Financial	Supporting the grandchildren; managing a club subscription; laying things down for the future; saving to visit my family in Sierra Leone; managing financial affairs of declining partner; handing affairs over to children.
5. Health maintenance	Going for a walk every day; dance/chair exercise (some swing/rock n' roll), keep fit at home; sunbathing/walking in the garden/local park/riverside; having a good meal at the pensioners' centre.
6. Advancement (e.g in knowledge or skill)	French classes, reading about history, watching a nature program on tv ; reading the newspaper daily; researching health condition; learning to cook nutritious meals; mastering new technologies to aid reading/communications.
7. Hobbies (at home or outside of home)	Reading, poetry, singing, bingo, jigsaws, baking, doing a puzzle, (e.g. crosswords), card games/dominos, reading newspaper, listening to radio, messing about in the garden, watching sport / soaps / quizzes on tv; going to theatre/watching live NT streams.
8. Daily life	Just keeping going, living life as it is now; trying to keep house/ garden tidy,

		cooking; preventing falls; getting things up the stairs; showering/bathing; just keeping busy.
9.	Autonomy	Self-sufficiency, doing my own housework/shopping/gardening/decorating/ ironing; watering my own plants, seeking out opportunities for adventure /getting out alone; finding a permanent in-home carer; staying well and independent; shopping at market/supermarket; taking a trip out with friends to a restaurant or to visit a place of special interest; being able to walk / travel independently to places ; being able to drive still.
10.	New Experiences	Visiting family in Sierra Leone; a trip out to the countryside.

Participants reported between 3 and 9 projects each. The average number of projects generated within a project domain (as categorized by the 10 categories above) was 6.77 (SD 1.48). Those living independently compared to those in residential care reported a higher number of projects in their system (6+), perhaps indicative of higher levels of enabling resources and external support. The relative frequency of project types is shown in Figure 2.
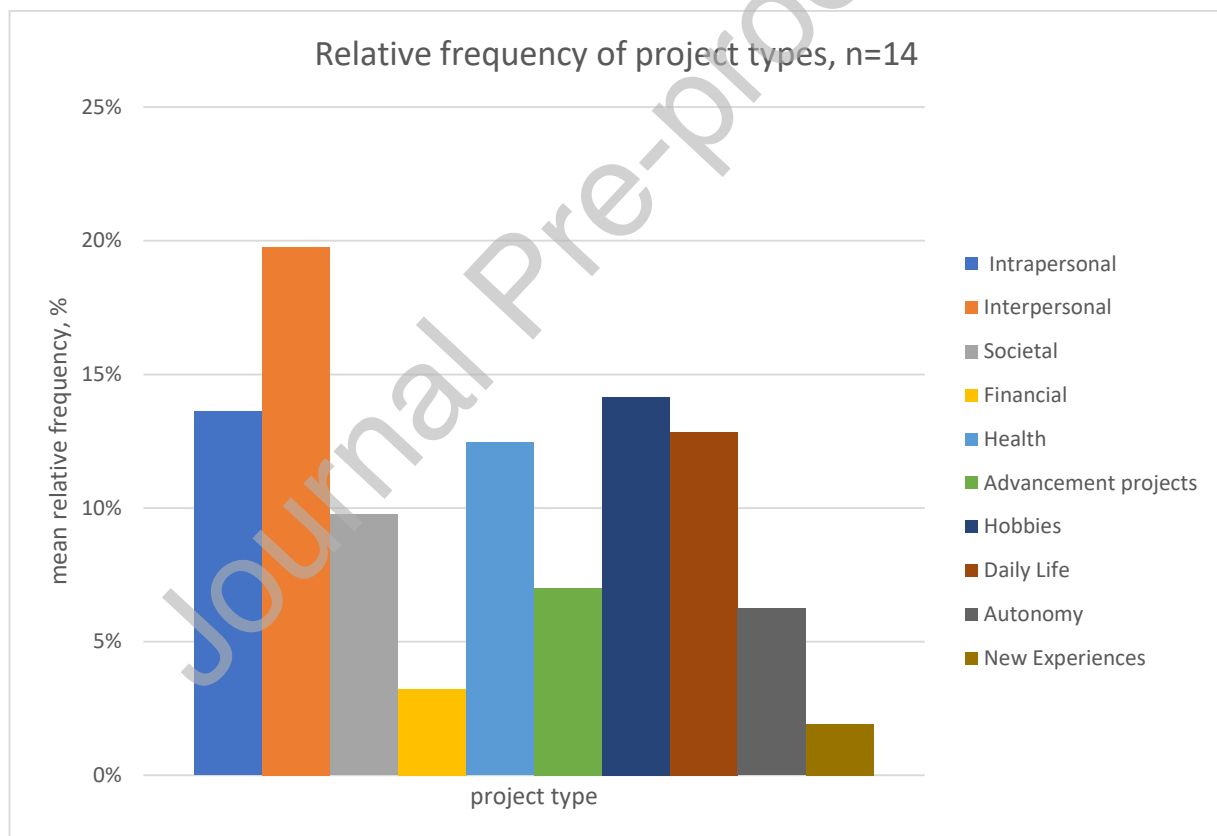
Fig 2: Frequency Distribution of Project Types (%)
Note, The higher the relative frequency, the higher a particular project features across our participants' project systems. For example, interpersonal projects constitute 20% of the overall whole, compared to 'new experiences' which constitute only 2%.

Consistent with previous research health-related, daily maintenance and recreational projects feature fairly regularly within older people's daily projects. Below we focus on the type of projects most frequently mentioned by our participants, interpersonal and intrapersonal project, which are also less well reported in existing literature.

3.2.1 Interpersonal projects

Interpersonal projects (for example, those focused on building relationships with other people) occurred most frequently; our participants were vitally engaged in projects supporting partners and family (both distant and close family) and connecting with friends on a regular basis through church, social and pensioner's clubs.

An example is Dorothy, a first-generation immigrant from Sierra Leone, for whom maintaining a strong connection with her family was one of her core projects, particularly her two UK-based adult children who telephone her three times a day and clean for her: 'taking care of my children and the family [they] are the most important people in my life'. Supporting her wider network of sister, brother, nieces and nephews in the local area and another two children and grandchildren in Sierra Leone (where she had recently visited for the first time in 18 years) also feature highly, including providing financial support: *'I support my grandchildren. I give them some [money] …what I can support, what I can give to them, I give them. …. It's a difficult country there, their living, they have their living but, you know, if you don't get the money, you don't get what you want'*.

Making another visit to Sierra Leone was high on her agenda of future projects.

A central goal for Bessie, who lived independently at home, was managing her relationship to her husband, including the changing dynamics between them since her spouse was diagnosed with early dementia. An active volunteer in the community, she was having to adjust what she could achieve on a daily basis*.* She was also managing changes in the intimacy of their relationship and in the changes in his personality: *I argue more with him recently. He isn't talking very much at the moment and that irritates me. If he would tell me that I am forgetting something or that something is wrong, then we could do something about it then. But he won't say …'.* Bessie's experiences document the challenges of caring for a spouse and the difficulties in juggling an unexpected new role and daily life.

As well as care-giving, an underlying theme in our participants' goal trajectories is about desiring <u>not</u> *to* be cared *for,* or resisting assistance, and retaining control. This relates to both practical and emotional support. Dorothy, for example, did not want to be perceived as a problem by her adult children, and invested efforts in concealing when she was upset: '…*sometimes I don't let her [daughter] know that something is wrong. I take care'.* Being perceived to be competent, in control and managing in life underlies older people's interpersonal relations with their adult children. All our participants stressed a strong desire for autonomy and were ambivalent about receiving support. Daisy, aged 96, and living independently resisted her adult daughter's interventions to manage her daily life activities but, in order to avoid conflict had ceased to resist on some tasks:

> *'I do everything myself indoors, but I don't tell my daughter, so she goes over it again …I used to do my cleaning, my bathroom, my kitchen and the hoovering. My Jeanie [daughter] said, 'You can stop that.' …. As soon as she walked in, she'd say, 'What have you done?' I'd say, 'Nothing.' She'd go, 'All right. Are you telling me lies?' I said, 'I've never been a liar and I'm not going to*

start now.' So she said, 'All right, I'll let it go.' So I don't do it now. I used to do all my own housework.'

The context above captures the changing dynamics between an ageing mother (Daisy) and her care giving daughter and some of the tensions in negotiating care in older age.

3.2.2 Intrapersonal projects

Intrapersonal projects (i.e. self-orientated goals) occurred frequently in our participant's goal trajectories (14% of the whole), including spiritual advancement. This was most vitally expressed by the Franciscan Sister X, who had one core project, for spiritual peace and a quietening of her inner voice: '*All my life, the one goal I've always had is to be at peace, and people who know me would think it a stupid thing for me to say because I'm not that much of a peaceful person but I've always wanted to be at peace with myself'.* There were no trivial or mundane pursuits in Sister X's project system; day-to-day projects were insignificant, daily tasks (and other people) simply got in the way of her one overarching goal to connect to God. Intrapersonal goals – where featured – therefore tended to be core goals; for instance, Stuart, aged 86, a retired actor living in care with Parkinson's, expressed an urgency in writing his autobiography and in documenting his legacy, devoting every day of his life to commit to this project.

3.2.3 Societal projects

An emergent project category in the research on older people's goal systems is the societal project, whereby many of our participants were actively engaged with voluntary work and supporting a social club or charity, helping neighbours (e.g. assisting with d-i-y) and local schools (making flower baskets) and charities (offering leadership / directorship). Bessie's charitable projects (*'doing a good turn')* is a core life-long project, a value she inherited from her mother, '*my mum would do for anybody'* and remains a family tradition she continues. Her voluntary work for a Cancer charity began in her 20s and continued after her mum's death from cancer, until her own ill-health prevented her from doing so. For Renee, aged 90 and living independently, baking cakes for various friends and charities (e.g. Darby and Joan club, her church) is a core project; she reports baking up to 100 Christmas cakes one year; '*it makes you get up and go, it makes you think that you have something to do, where I think, you know, I'd be a bit bored if I wasn't doing it really'.* Baking is a value she also learnt from her mother, a way of continuing her family values and strengthening the bond with family: '*I mean, I've been brought up with it, my Mum, it was her life and soul and I always remember when she was poorly, she used to say, 'Don't you forget, you have to keep going, you keep it going*'.

3.3 Project appraisal (Table 3)

Table 3: Project wellbeing (ranked on 8 dimensions) (Little x) n=11	
Projects subjectively ranked for level of:	Mean (Std Dev)
Importance	7.67 (3.2)
Absorption	8.89 (1.2)
Hope	9.00 (1.3)
Achievable (efficacy in	5.00 (2.6)

achieving)	
Support	4.67 (3.4)
Benefit to Others	7.33 (3.0)
Challenge/Stress	7.20 (2.2)
Joyful	9.17 (1.0)
Note: A higher score (range from 1 – 10) on all dimensions other than stress indicates higher wellbeing; hope & joy factored together (i.e. they share a relationship; importance and absorption in a task also share a similar structure).	

Irrespective of the number or type of projects, or their personal circumstances (e.g. living in care or living independently) our results (Table 3) show that our participants were flourishing on many of the wellbeing dimensions, recording particularly high mean scores for levels of joy and hope. Lower scores were recorded for levels of support, perceptions of efficacy and the level of challenge/stress a project presents. The singular mean was 7.4 on a 10-point likert scale, indicating a higher than average wellbeing score for our sample (the average being 5.0). Below, we focus on the two attributes of project appraisal that scored most highly: hope and joy.

Hope is a motivational value; it captures a desire to make things happen, a belief that things are still possible. Our participants felt particularly hopeful about what they are doing in life, with a mean value of 9 (out of a possible score of 10). Hope was particularly important in motivating participants to maintain an active lifestyle. For example, hope continued to galvanize Muriel, aged 93, a retired actor in a residential care home, to walk and be physically active: '*Yes, yes. I believe in being active, I really do. It's very easy to sit down*'. Walking was integral to her life, an experience that began as a child with TB, when she was contained in a Swiss sanitorium from an early age. Hope is also what energized Wolfie, paralysed from a fall, to defy the medical verdict that he would not walk again: '*But I do!'* taking evident delight in proving the doctors wrong through his determined engagement with his physiotherapists.

Joy is a largely underexplored emotion in contemporary positive psychology and often confused with happiness or gratitude. Emmons defines joy as a distinct emotion, that combines happiness with gratitude, and a quality that makes life worth living and that is integral to wellbeing (Emmons, 2019). Our participants expressed various levels of joy, which broadly fall into 5 dimensions that align with Kuan Johnson's (2020) framework of joy: a sense of harmony (e.g. with family, friends, values and/or God); vitality (a sense of energy and aliveness derived from a particular project); transcendence (e.g. a spiritual peace); freedom (being independent, free thinking); and gratitude (for a live well lived). Joy is also a motivational force: '*Everything is a joy to me …[it brings] Purpose in life. That is what life is all about. Getting on and doing it and not sitting about and moaning. And thank god I am able to do [that]*' (Bessie). It's partially expressed through '*doing a good turn for someone*', reciprocating when others helped her, a value she learnt from her mother, and thus one that sits in harmony with her family values.

Joy is also represented in a singular core project, for example, Stuart's autobiography, '*Oh I'd do it every day. A 10*' [the top score]. For the Franciscan nun, joy was captured by living a spiritual life and the prospect of transcendence: '*A few more lines, a few more grey hairs … It doesn't matter; none of that*

matters. So you have that complete freedom to just enjoy life really'. Her joy derived from being in harmony with God.

3.4 Project Places (Table 4)

Table 4 shows that the places supporting project pursuit in older age tend to be local and easily accessible, for example, the home, garden, the local outdoors and city centres that were accessible by walking. These settings appear to offer multiple affordances for different project pursuits; a local café, for instance, may afford a sense of peace and psychological restoration for one individual (a restorative niche), whilst for another it affords opportunities to socially interact (an affinity niche). A religious venue (in this case a church) similarly offers peace and a refuge from the world (a restorative niche), whilst for many older people it's a vital source of social support (an affinity niche), and for others it is conducive to transcendence and absorption in prayer and connecting more closely to God (a flow niche).

Natural settings are the single most important place niche in terms of offering psychological restoration

Table 4 Environmental Niche	Relative Frequency	Place Type	Relative frequency (SD) in descending rank order
Restorative Niche	0.38	Natural settings (the sun, own garden, public garden/park, riverside, flowers / plants, countryside)	0.50
		Own home (a window to look out of, indoor plants, shower)	0.21
		Outdoor public space (n/hood streets)	0.17
		Public buildings (**church**, library, arts center)	0.10
		Café	0.02
Affinity niche	0.31	Public buildings (**church**, theatre, arts centre, library)	0.35
		Downtown (shops / market) (newsagent, post office, Asda)	0.25
		Clubs / societies / social or 'specialist interest' club (Richard III society, cricket club, Darby & Jones club)	0.20
		Restaurant / café	0.10
		Further away places (son's home, countryside, trips out)	0.08
		Public-private open space (apartment landing / stairwell)	0.03
Flow niche	0.31	Room in own home (bedroom / kitchen/ living) or another's home	0.39
		Learning or devotional context (social centre, **church**)	0.21
		Technology assisted niche (e.g. phone or computer)	0.15
		Outdoors (walking)	0.09
		Charity context (running stall at hospital, putting on a luncheon at the D&J club)	0.06
		Eating venue (restaurant, canteen)	0.06
		Driving	0.03

and recovery from fatigue and stress, a finding consistent with restorative environment theory

(constituting 50% of the total RN's mentioned, see Table 4). Access to neighbourhood public buildings (e.g. a library, art centre, social centre) are important affinity niches (35% of the total), facilitating vital connection to other people, whereas one's own home is the most important place for concentrated activity and absorption (flow niches), such as cookery and baking (39% of the total, Table 4).

3.4.1 Restorative niches

Desreen, aged 83, Jamaican first-generation migrant, finds her restorative niche at a vibrant local art center, where she could find peace amongst other people engaged in singular activities (reading, working on the computer etc):

> *'The Albany, it's like a theatre and people come in and they write, it's very quiet and very peaceful, and you can get your coffee or whatever and sit there peacefully and there is also a garden outside, and people come there and they write and some are on computers, nobody seems to bother anybody else … And upstairs I think they have places where they do a bit of a thing or performing, because it is quite big and most of the time I go in there and just have my cup of coffee and sit down for a while'.*

Other restorative niches are itemized in Table 4 above, and include solitary places, where someone can be alone, in privacy, and unrestricted.

3.4.2 Affinity niches

Affinity niches tend to involve food and hospitality or shared hobbies that foster a sense of belonging. Wolfie's preferred affinity niche was the atrium-restaurant in his care home: '*I like to sit here and I can see things and it's quite light here. Well you talk to people, I've got friends here that I talk to. There are two that are sat down there and there's a woman that sits at my [table]… This place is the best in England, without a doubt'.*

For Jeremy, aged 81, a retired actor living in a care home, a vital affinity niche was his French class, where he could reconnect to a culture he loves and his memories of travels in France. Jeremy has bipolar and has recently transferred from one care home to another; he found his new care home residents frustrating, he was a bit '*snooty*' about them (his own words) and struggled to fit in (*I'm a minority of one*). Nevertheless, he found a sense of fit and compatibility with other residents in his French class. Owing to neurological problems he was unlikely to be able to travel again, but this forum allowed him to embrace French culture, and converse in French with others, with the possibility of forging new friendships: '*I like the French class as well as any of the others because there's a very nice woman who takes it and I don't know much French, and what I do know I've rather forgotten from years gone by, but it's clearly a good thing to try and revive, and I like that as well as anything*'. For Desreen, shopping for flowers at the market was a way of reconnecting to her Jamaican roots and to the context of her grandmother's garden back in Jamaica. Affinity niches therefore capture a world where one feels a strong sense of cultural and social compatibility. For Peter, affinity niches were full-day outings with retired like-minded businessmen to watch cricket all day: '*They're all retired, all retired businessmen. Ooh, yes, I would think that...yes, all over 75; my little group. There are others who are younger but my little group certainly; there's only one I can think of who is under 75, and that's a retired doctor*'. His affinity niche forms a juncture between fellow male professionals and cricket enthusiasts.

3.4.3 Flow niches

Flow niches are where we can work interrupted and achieve our goals. For Renee, this was her kitchen, an assembly line for cake production, and the vital hub in her home: '*I always seem to be busy and always baking really. I sometimes think, 'Ooh, how can I get it done? I must get it done…' Like today I've done three ginger loaves and I've done three bran loaves. Well bran loaf, I did some last week … To be truthful, I often have the telly on I'm always in there [the kitchen]'.* For Sister X, a flow niche is anywhere where she could concentrate on prayer: '*It doesn't matter what you sit or kneel on, it's what you do when you're doing that matters, and you can do that sitting on one of these chairs or sitting on the floor or whatever, that's just things. …That and Mass are the two things we hang our whole life on'.*

4.0 **Discussion**

Our study was interested in what the older-old do in their world, the project places associated with their daily doings (i.e. project places) and how these dimensions work in tandem to support wellbeing. In exploring the world of older people through the lens of their personal projects, our aim was to capture the unique developmental stage of older age, using similar approaches applied in exploring adolescent development (Roe and Aspinall 2012). In doing so, our aim was to encourage society to think differently about older people, as individuals not just 'coping' with loss management and daily functioning but people with the expert knowledge, experience, wisdom and motivation to contribute to society.

Our first research question asked, what sorts of project pursuits characterise older-old age? Our results show that the older-old engage in a rich variety of personal projects. The elicited projects display a hierarchy of order that might be arrayed on a continuum from life maintenance ('just keeping going day-to-day') to transcendence ('deepening my relationship with God', or 'finding peace in the world'). Our older people were engaged and zestful in their project pursuits, immersed in social interactions, spiritual pursuits, and volunteering activities. The projects elicited include a range of intrapersonal and interpersonal projects, embracing new experiences and learning new things but also keeping going or reviving interests in the face of decline. Our study found a higher mean number of projects in the older-old than previously reported; our participants reported an average of 6.77 projects compared to an average of 2.8 (Lawton et al., 2002) and 2.4 (Saajanaho et al., 2016) in people aged 70+.

This lived experience challenges the negative status quo about the role older people play in daily life, as frail, vulnerable people needing care and a drain on financial resources. Their project pursuits also indicate they are making a significant societal contribution in the form of volunteer activities to the wider community, to their families and friends in the form of emotional and financial support and have the desire to share their knowledge and expertise to younger people. Our study shows, albeit in a small sample, that societally motivated goals feature more prominently than the previous goal literature has identified. This suggests a need to reassess the social value of the older-old, to perceive them as resource not a burden, and to view their experience as an accumulation (and culmination) of wisdom, knowledge and expertise rather than a denouement (Levitin, 2020). Our study shows that the final decades of life can be a period of continuing growth and learning, a life stage with its own distinct character, rather than a period of decline.

Second, we asked if project pursuits characterized wellbeing and successful ageing in this demographic. Quantitative data showed that our participants are engaged in projects that contribute high levels of joy, meaning, hope and absorption. The data suggests our participants were indeed thriving, engaged in multiple, varied projects, living joyfully, remaining vital and engaged in older age. However, the support dimension (an important correlate of wellbeing) and perceptions of likely project accomplishment (efficacy) ranked lower (i.e. 4.67 and 5.00 respectively out of maximum score of 10). It is therefore

important we find ways to support older people to stay active and engaged in their personal projects. For instance, an important project for Stuart (a retired actor) was to write his memoirs but owing to failing eyesight he was struggling to even start this project. Support could be easily provided in the form of assisted technologies (e.g. speech recognition and magnification technologies) that would allow Stuart to record, listen back to and review his memoirs. Our findings indicate a need to afford more support for project pursuit in ageing, whilst also taking advantage of older people's skills and motivation to contribute to society.

Third - as we try to understand what external resources can best support older people - we asked what enabling places are associated with successful project pursuit. Place has a dynamic and constitutive presence in the activation of personal projects (Fig 1) but has received little attention. There are only a handful of studies – mostly carried out within the context of restorative environment research - that have identified a role for 'restorative niches' in supporting the manageability (and efficacy) of personal projects (Roe and Aspinall, 2011). Whilst we know about the psychological processes associated with a restorative niche (attention restoration, stress regulation) the special character of 'enabling places' in project pursuit (their content and structure) remains unclear. Hence in this study we broadened the restorative niche framework that has so far been applied in personal project research to include social resources (conceptualized as affinity niches) and other psychological resources such as flow (i.e. flow niches.)

Across our study, we found a diverse range of place niches present in older people's project systems; they included the park, a sport or social club, a cafe, a church, a neighbouring streetscape or a private home and garden. Importantly, these places offered different affordances for different individuals. Our study identified a sense of multivalency across goals and places. For example, for some participants a church was a place of deep spiritual connection; for another it was a place to belong and socially connect; for another, a place to volunteer. In this way, place projects are dynamic, and offer a range of affordances that are relational (and unique) to the individual and their goal. The range of project places identified in our study (Table 4) speaks to a need for inclusive design of the built environment that accommodates for the full diversity of physical, sensory and cognitive abilities in older age, and that ensures the older people can access the full range of a neighbourhood's educational, economic, social, cultural and health opportunities.

Our study identified the places where the older-old pursue their personal projects. Whilst these places constitute much more than just the backdrop to a project, our study did not evaluate the specific character of these environments, nor how they helped realize a specific project. We need better tools to evaluate the specific benefits places bring in personal project pursuits; indeed, we need a theory of project places, that embraces the social context and the specific interaction of the place with the project in hand. Duff 's (2012) theory of 'enabling places' offers a theoretical framework; she argues that the production of place is 'relational' (i.e. the possibilities of place vary by the user) and that the unique character of an 'enabling place' arises through the convergence of material (or physical), affective and person dimensions, which she defines as '*the intimate web of associations, processes and transactions that enmesh people and places, 'person' and 'context'*' (Duff, 2012, p: 1389). Project places are dynamic and are 'made' (or constructed) in terms of what the space affords a particular individual, in this context, for project actualisation. Little's original model might be adjusted to reflect the relational context of affordances (as conceptualised by Gibson, 1979), that is, the place affordance is relational to the individual and, for this reason, is better categorized as a 'dynamic' feature than 'stable' in Little's mode (Fig 1). A project place, we suggest, is in dynamic flux and the possibilities it offers for project actualisation will vary, for example, a place might be enabling of one project (e.g. connecting with others socially), but disabling of another (managing a conflict or difference of opinion), as in the context

of a church described above. In summary, the advancement of a theory of project places requires more careful analysis of diverse sites drawing on specific analytical tools (for example, tools that capture affective, social and physical affordances in place (Clark and Uzzell, 2002, Heft, 1988, Roe and Aspinall, 2011).

A theory of project places needs to recognize that the social and physical do not exist independently of each other; '*any environment is the result of the continuing interaction between natural and man-made components, social processes, and the relationships between individuals and groups*' (Yen and Syme, 1999, page 287). Project efficacy and success depends partly on the social context in which it operates and with whom (or for whom) a project is carried out (Little 1983). Whilst our study methodology explored the social network of our participants, our project analysis did not reveal anything particularly new or revelatory that hasn't been previously reported (Blythe et al., 2015, Oliver et al., 2018). A deeper probe into the composition and size of social networks in facilitating project attainment is therefore warranted in future research.

Finally, we recognize the importance of internal psychological resources that older people bring to their project pursuits. The literature suggests the personality traits of Openness, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Extraversion all support accomplishment in goal success; for example, Openness is consistently and strongly related to creative accomplishment (Kaufman et al., 2016). As yet, correlates between personality traits and project pursuit have not been studied in the older-old. This is the subject of a follow-on study (in preparation); however, evident from our earlier analysis (Blythe et al., 2015) is the role that character strengths play in successful ageing. Rather than just 'coping' with loss management and daily living, the participants in our study have strong internal resources helping to activate and drive their projects, including agency, persistence, self-sufficiency, equanimity, humour and courage. Whilst many of our sample experienced substantial physical impairment (e.g. reduced vision), their strengths are not expressed by their level of physical functioning but rather by their zest, perseverance and emotional resources.

In summary, our data challenges the negative lens through which Western society often perceives old age and helps to reframe later life as a period of continuing growth and development. Older-old age is commonly perceived as a period of deterioration, decline, dependency; the skills, knowledge, and wisdom acquired as people age fades into the background. Both in social media and in the press, we have seen increasingly negative and discriminatory attitudes towards the elderly (McCarthy Stone, 2021). As a result of this thinking, we fail to take advantage of older people's capabilities and insights and we tend to underestimate their social value. Lower social values of older people ascribes them lower social status, and diminished roles, which not only affects their self-esteem and wellbeing, but results in underfunded systems of social care for older people and their lower priority in congested healthcare systems. This study identified the diverse personal projects the older old engage in, their relationship to wellbeing, and the social and place contexts that support older people to engaging in meaningful projects. The external resources supporting older people's projects include local libraries, art centres, social clubs, places of worship and walkable neighbourhood streets that allow them to stay active and access local facilities. Another resource is easily accessible 'bumping places' (such as a local café, street, or market) that allow for meaningful impromptu social interactions with strangers and familiar acquaintances alike (Amin, 2002).

Limitations

Since we deliberately targeted older flourishing adults our sample is not representative of all older people. We do not know, for instance, the goal content of older adults who are experiencing poorer mental wellbeing, or indeed how the Covid-19 pandemic may have affected goal content (our data was collected pre Covid-19). Future research might compare the project systems of flourishing older adults versus those doing less well, to identify the personal and contextual differences in goal efficacy, and where to target social and health care resources for better support. The sample size of our wellbeing survey was too small to derive wide-scale applications and allowed for only limited statistical analysis, that is, the frequency ratings of projects, people and places. In addition, only two in our sample were from Black and minority ethnic groups and religious orientation limited only to Christian beliefs. We therefore need further research to explore PPA among more ethnically diverse older people as well as in different socioeconomic contexts.

We might have administered psychological scales (e.g. a subjective wellbeing scale) to correlate with the singular project scale and ratify our results on wellbeing. The appraisal of projects as one system (using the singular scale), made it hard to unpick what types of projects are associated with higher subjective wellbeing and which with negative affect. We also met a degree of resistance to quantifying 'how well things are going' using a single-item global scale to capture flourishing. Some of our participants found it difficult to rank score (and persistently resisted scoring) their projects as one singular item on the wellbeing dimensions, resulting in some missing quantitative data. This may reflect a wider difficulty in assigning a metric to quantifying flourishing in this age group; many of our participants were independent thinkers, and not afraid to say what they thought or challenge the kinds of questions being asked by the researchers.   It is also possible this resistance reflects a problem with a single-item scale that aggregates all life goals into one unit. There is undoubtedly cross-fertilisation between projects and inter-goal relationships. For instance, in the case of Dorothy, the context of Sierra Leone is both a financial project (to support her grandchildren), an interpersonal project (to nurture family relationships far away) and an aspiration (to visit). Little's (1983) original methodology employed a cross-impact matrix by which to assess the extent to which one project impacts in a facilitative or conflicting way on another project. The inclusion of this matrix in follow-on studies would be helpful in determining the degree of conflict, facilitation and independence between projects and identifying 'core' goals in the project system, which then might be ranked individually, rather than as 'one' unit.

The study suggests many directions for future research, including the need to look at life-stage transitions and how the project system changes over time with loss of independence in older-old age. The personal history of a project could be better contextualized, for example, what prior experiences support project manageability and efficacy? How do past projects impinge on the present, and future goals? Future studies might look at the continuity of goals over a person's life and how these can continue to be supported in later life. And, as noted above, we need to advance the theory of project places to better understand the interaction between project activation, success and place context.

5.0 Conclusion

As far as we know this is the first study to explore the personal projects of people in the last decades of their life. Our findings challenge the negative stereotypes associated with older-old age and raise awareness of the strengths and assets this demographic continue to bring to society. We show (albeit in a small sample) that older people in their eighties and nineties can be zestful and vitally engaged in meaningful project pursuits, and that this supports their flourishing. We identified the importance of the physical environment (i.e. restorative, affinity and flow niches) in supporting older people's personal projects. Our methods, using PPA as the unit of analysis, offer a framework for follow-on studies

exploring goal efficacy and wellbeing in the older-old. We also identify the need for an expanded theory of project places and suggest that Duff's (2012) 'enabling resource' framework might be one way to advance this, alongside a more through integration of affordances (Gibson, 1979) in Little's (1983) socio-ecological framework.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors whose names are listed immediately below declare no personal, financial or professional conflicts of interest.

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Appendix 1, singular personal project assessment tool

Consider the different activities, pursuits, commitments and projects in which you are currently involved **right now**. We call this your "personal project system."   What sorts of things are you engaged in?

Considering things **on the whole** (e.g imagine your projects are all in one hat), how would you evaluate your current projects on the following dimensions?

On **how meaningful** your projects are, on a scale of 0-10, from Not at all Meaningful to Very Meaningful (M)

On **how absorbing** your projects are, on a scale of 0-10, from Not at All Absorbing to Very Absorbing (E)

On **how easy** your projects are to achieve, on a scale of 0-10, from Not at All
Achievable to easily achieved (A)

On **how well supported** your projects are by other people on a scale of 0-10, from Not at All Supported to Strongly Supported by Others (R)

On how much your projects **benefit others**, from Not at All to Considerable Benefit for Others (R)

On **how challenging** (or stressful) your projects are, on a scale of 1-10, from Not at all Stressful to Very Stressful (P)

On **how joyful** your projects are, on a scale of 1-10, from Not at all Joyful to Very Joyful (P)

On **how hopeful** your projects, on a scale of 1-10, from Not at All Hopeful to Very Hopeful (H)