

Summary



In the future, more spouses will age together and are expected to continue to live together with their partner in their own homes. Many of these ageing community-dwelling couples will have to deal with declining health. In the face of declining health, everyday activities can often no longer be performed as they previously were. Changes in everyday activities are of particular concern, when it is not possible anymore to engage in everyday activities that have essential personal meaning. It is to be expected that spouses will influence each other in dealing with the changes in their everyday activities and in the meanings they attribute to their everyday activities. So far, knowledge is limited on everyday activities of ageing couples which limits our understanding of how ageing couples might be supported in ageing well together.

The overall aim of this thesis was to advance knowledge on the everyday activities of community-dwelling ageing couples in the face of declining health. We defined everyday activities as all the things people do in their everyday life either alone or together. In four empirical and one methodological study, three main topics were explored: (1) Changing couples' everyday activities; (2) Meaning of couples' everyday activities; and (3) Spousal influences on everyday activities.

Chapter 2 describes a 2-year qualitative study on changing everyday activities among eight community-dwelling late-life couples. The participating couples were purposefully selected from the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam to include participants with a recent health decline. Changing everyday activities was found to be a two-way process of: (1) converging, and (2) keeping up, which occurred in three fluid phases. Converging was a slow inward movement with a shift towards diminished everyday activities performed in a smaller world. Keeping up was an outward movement in order to resist the converging process by using everyday activities as a means to keep fit, both physically and mentally, and to connect with the wider social world. In the first phase, couples maintained their unique linked activity pattern. In the second phase, spouses resisted converging by keeping up. In the third phase, spouses co-performed everyday activities closely together. In this phase, meanings were rearranged over fewer everyday activities. Thereby, valued meanings could be maintained and continued.

Chapter 3 retrospectively addressed changed everyday activities and meaning in a case study that examined a late-life couple's experience of everyday activities following the wife's stroke. The main finding was that their current everyday activities were fully intertwined. They acted as one entity when performing their everyday activities, functioning as one body with coordinating parts. This was conceptualized as one body, three hands, and two minds. The three hands in the metaphor showed that both had incorporated three hands to closely co-perform their everyday activities as though they were one organism with three hands. The two minds showed that they both contributed their cognitive resources to their functioning as a whole.

In **chapter 4** the focus was on meaning in co-occupation, referring to shared everyday activities. The study used interview data from one late-life couple plus photographs taken of them engaged in one of their most valued co-occupations: going for a walk together. The couple selected photographs, discussed the meanings they attributed to them and created a photo story. The findings consisted of the couple's photo story comprising the eight photos they selected and four themes representing the meanings of this co-occupation. These themes were: (1) Together but also individual; (2) It has always been like that; (3) Experiencing freedom; and (4) Being eager to come across new things. The themes all had a shared and a personalised aspect. The shared and personalised meanings were co-constituted and created by the spouses together and mediated by their shared and personal values.

Chapter 5 deals with the topic of meaning from a methodological perspective. We questioned the potential threats to validity when analysing and publishing in English findings that originate from non-English interviews. The argument was developed using examples from the different phases of translation as encountered in the case study on the experience of everyday activities after a stroke (Chapter 3). We argued that interpretation of meaning is the core of qualitative research and reasoned that as translation is also an interpretive act, meaning may get lost or changed in the translation process. Recommendations were suggested, such as to stay in the original language as long and as much as possible; to delay the use of fixed one-word translations; and to translate the most important findings and the quotations 'side-

by-side' with a professional translator. These recommendations aimed to contribute to the best possible representation and understanding of the interpreted experiences of the participants and thereby to the validity of qualitative research.

Chapter 6 reports a quantitative study that investigated the relation between spousal physical functioning and social participation in later-life couples. The study used data from 582 Dutch couples who participated in the 'Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe'. The level of social participation was measured as participation in and frequency of five social activities. The level of social participation of husbands and wives in couples with both spouses having physical limitations was found to be lower than the level of social participation of husbands and wives in couples without physical limitations. Contrary to the expectation, the level of social participation of husbands with physical limitations whose wife had no physical limitations did not significantly differ from the social participation of husbands in couples without physical limitations. The level of social participation of wives without physical limitations whose husband had physical limitations was significantly lower than the social participation of wives in couples without physical limitations. Thereby, a gender-specific relation between physical functioning of one spouse and social participation in the other spouse was demonstrated.

Chapter 7 interprets the main findings of this thesis along the lines of the three main topics and gives methodological considerations and implications for research and practice.

Conclusions and implications

Everyday activities of ageing couples in the face of health decline were changing in a two-way process of converging and keeping up, which could be interpreted as a proactive way of optimization. Co-performing everyday activities closely together was interpreted to be a dyadic compensation strategy. We suggested that couples were rearranging meanings of everyday activities in fewer everyday activities to maintain valued meanings. This process was interpreted to contribute to internal

continuity and to maintaining personal and couple identities. Spouses created shared and personalised meanings in everyday activities in a dynamic process of mutually influencing each other. We found gender differences in favour of husbands in the spousal influences on social participation in couples with and without physical limitations.

Future studies are needed to further understand changes in couples' everyday activities. These studies should use the couple as unit of analysis and it is recommended to include mixed methods designs. It would be important to further investigate: (1) phases in the changing of everyday activities; (2) the impact of co-performing everyday activities on ageing well; (3) the role of both individual and shared meanings; (4) the potential positive effect on ageing well of re-appraising meanings in fewer everyday activities as well as; (5) the role of gender in spousal influences on their functioning. This would contribute to the development of couple-based interventions for couples in the face of health decline in order to support couples in ageing well together.