Inequalities in later life: patterns, consequences and policy responses

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Demographic aging brings with it a systematic transformation of all spheres of social life … beneath even the daunting fiscal projections, lies a longer-term economic, social and cultural dynamic … What will it be like to live in societies that are much older than any we have ever known or imagined?

*The Commission on Global Aging (1999)*

- What about compression of morbidity and improvements in living standards? How is the experience of ageing changing?
- And the opening of a ‘third age’ space, post-retirement, post-parenting and pre-dependency.
- But the resources to enjoy a ‘third’ age, are strongly related to socio-economic position – how important are class inequalities in later life?
Frailty trajectories by age and cohort
Frailty trajectories by age and cohort
Age and depressed mood
(CES-D score adjusted for gender and ethnicity)
Survival rates by wealth, age 50+

**Women**

- **Richest**
- **Poorest**

**Men**

- **Richest**
- **Poorest**

Graph showing the proportion of men and women surviving over months, with two curves for each gender, one for the richest and one for the poorest.
Frailty trajectories by cohort and wealth

Poorest

Richest

Age

Poorest quintile

Richest quintile
Frailty trajectories by cohort and wealth

![Graph showing frailty trajectories by cohort and wealth. The x-axis represents age, and the y-axis represents predicted frailty score. The graph compares the trajectories of the poorest and richest quintiles. The poorest quintile is represented by black lines, and the richest quintile is represented by grey lines. The graph illustrates how frailty increases with age for both groups, with the poorest quintile generally experiencing higher frailty scores at any given age.](image-url)
Frailty trajectories by cohort and wealth

Poorest

Richest

Age

Poorest quintile

Richest quintile
Age, depressed mood and wealth (CES-D score adjusted for gender and ethnicity)
Age and depression: explaining the relationship

Predicted score

Gender and ethnicity

+ Marital status

Age
Age and depression: explaining the relationship
Mechanisms and policy responses
Where does resilience fit in?

- Thriving, or bouncing back, or at least not declining, despite challenging circumstances.
- A significant literature covering early life, with a focus on successful transitions into adulthood and outcomes in adult life.
- Increasing interest in resilience (and vulnerability) in later life and how such concepts might help us understand differences in the ageing process and associated outcomes.
- Not too late to make a difference …
- Focus is typically on psychological resilience, or resilient communities, but socioeconomic resources are centrally important to resilience.
- These are often ignored in research and policy, which typically do not:
  - Deal with differences within a type of event (e.g. widowhood, or retirement);
  - Focus on which groups are more likely to experience challenges and how resources to respond to challenges are distributed.
Depression and type of retirement transition

Change in depression score compared with those remaining in work: age and gender standardised

Regression model
Change in depression score compared with those remaining in work: age and gender standardised

Regression model
Class-related inequalities (resilience) pathways in later life

Class and Education

- Work and work quality
- Social status
- Social connections
- Social roles and participation
- Cultural practice
- Health behaviours
- Wealth/pension
- Material circumstances
- Health and wellbeing

Strong =  
Moderate =  
Weak =  

ELSA - English Longitudinal Study of Ageing
Concluding comments

- Significant class inequalities that continue into later life and persist (possibly grow) across age cohorts.
- And socioeconomic inequalities are crucial if we are to develop an appropriate understanding of resilience.
- But the mechanisms through which socioeconomic inequalities operate are complex:
  - Material/economic wellbeing;
  - Social and cultural capital;
  - Employment quality and retirement processes;
  - Social status.
- Almost no interventions around inequalities in later life. Could focus on:
  - Economic circumstances: pensions and housing quality
  - Key transitions: retirement; bereavement; onset of illness/frailty
  - Social roles that increase social connection, provide valued identities, contribute to personal development and enhance social status.