

Reframing later life: The ThriveSpan framework for ages 60-80

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Abstract

Increased longevity has reshaped later life, yet many psychological and career development models continue to reflect assumptions formed in earlier demographic contexts. In particular, the period between approximately 60 and 80 remains under-theorised, often compressed into narratives of decline, disengagement, or retirement transition. This paper reviews selected life-stage and ageing theories and examines their limitations in relation to contemporary later life. Drawing on this analysis, alongside empirical research on meaning and sustained career psychology practice, the paper introduces ThriveSpan, an integrative, meaning-centred framework designed to support wellbeing, identity, and intentional living in the 60–80 life phase.

Keywords: Later life; ageing; lifespan development; meaning-making; later-life wellbeing; career development

Introduction

Increased longevity has fundamentally altered the shape and experience of later life. In many Western societies, individuals can now expect to live well into their eighties and beyond, often with decades of relatively good health following the end of full-time work (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Yet the psychological and career development models most commonly used to understand the life course were developed in social,

economic, and demographic contexts where such longevity was far less common. As a result, many prevailing frameworks struggle to account adequately for the lived realities of contemporary later life.

These shifts have implications not only for individual wellbeing, but also for how work, retirement, health, and ageing are understood at policy, organisational, and cultural levels. Conceptual models that fail to reflect contemporary longevity risk reinforcing outdated assumptions about capability, dependency, and value in later life.

Traditional life-stage theories tend to compress later life into a single stage or frame it primarily through decline and disengagement (Erikson, 1982; Neugarten, 1974). Career development models commonly assume linear progression towards retirement and withdrawal (Super, 1990). While more recent affirmative narratives challenge deficit-based views, they often prioritise productivity or perpetual reinvention without fully engaging with existential depth or the realities of ageing bodies (Gullette, 2004; Holstein & Minkler, 2003). Together, these approaches struggle to capture the prolonged, psychologically complex period that now characterises later life, particularly the decades between sixty and eighty.

This period is psychologically distinctive. Individuals in their sixties and seventies may remain physically capable and future-oriented, while simultaneously becoming more conscious of ageing, mortality, and time as a limited resource (Carstensen, 1993, 2021). Many navigate multiple generational responsibilities, including supporting adult children, responding to the increasing needs of ageing parents, and anticipating their own future health and care trajectories. Questions of meaning, identity, contribution, and alignment often come to the fore, not primarily as a desire for reinvention, but as a deeper developmental reckoning with what matters now.

This reorientation is often subtle and internally experienced, emerging through shifts in motivation, tolerance, and attention rather than through overt role transitions. It may be felt as growing discomfort with previously satisfying roles, reluctance to commit to new busyness, or a sense that prevailing narratives of 'successful ageing' no longer fit lived experience. Such changes can be difficult to recognise within existing developmental frameworks.

The absence of affirming, differentiated models of later life also has intergenerational consequences. As Baars (2012, p. 5) observes, contemporary society often treats older people as 'another human species,' disconnected from one's own possible future. This failure of identification limits communication across generations and narrows developmental imagination for both younger and older adults. Cultural resistance to ageing, evident in phrases such as 'I'm not old, I'm ageless,' may appear to challenge ageism but can paradoxically reinforce it by positioning 'old' as something to be denied rather than inhabited with intention and authenticity. Frameworks that articulate later life as a legitimate developmental phase can therefore offer both older and younger generations more realistic and humane ways of understanding ageing.

This paper contributes to later-life theory in two ways: first, by challenging the tendency of lifespan models to compress later life into a single, undifferentiated stage, and second, by introducing ThriveSpan as an integrative conceptual framework for understanding the distinctive psychological and developmental characteristics of the 60–80 phase of later life.

Defining the 60–80 phase

While lifespan psychology emphasises chronological age and biological development, and stage theories focus on psychosocial tasks, contemporary later life requires both lenses. Box 1 sets out a framework for understanding the phases of life in which the age ranges provided are markers rather than boundaries – they reflect when particular psychological orientations commonly emerge while acknowledging individual variation. The model recognises that developmental stages describe inner experience and social context, which chronological age influences but does not determine.

This framework recognises the tension between stage and age. Life stages describe inner experience and social context, which may be disrupted by illness, caregiving, or non-normative life paths. At the same time, biological ageing remains a material reality that shapes capacity and vulnerability. A differentiated approach to later life must therefore attend to both psychological stages and chronological ageing, rather than assuming one negates the other.

Box 1: The five stages

Ages 0–20: *Formation*. A period of growth, dependency, and preparation. Identity is shaped largely by family, education, and circumstance. The primary developmental task is becoming someone able to engage with the wider world.

Ages 20–40: *Establishment*. A phase of building. Work, relationships, qualifications, and often parenting begin or intensify. Attention is predominantly outward, energy is typically high, and time is experienced as expansive. Even where life is difficult, the dominant orientation remains one of becoming.

Ages 40–60: *Responsibility and strain*. Often described as ‘prime years’, but frequently experienced as compressed and demanding. Career responsibility tends to peak, while emotional and practical demands from both adolescent and young adult children increase rather than diminish as they navigate their own transitions. Parents may begin to require support. This stage is not characterised by decline, but by sustained load-bearing.

Ages 60–80: *Reorientation* (ThriveSpan focus). Marked by the completion or loosening of primary life structures. Attention shifts from ‘building toward’ to what matters now, bringing questions of meaning, legacy, and how time and energy are used.

Ages 80+: *Reckoning and narrowing*. In advanced old age, change often accelerates. Loss becomes more frequent, physical and cognitive capacities may alter, and social worlds tend to contract. This stage is not defined solely by decline, but it involves different psychological tasks and support needs. Importantly, it should not be used to characterise later life as a whole, yet this conflation underpins many of the theoretical limitations identified in Section 2 and perpetuates ageist assumptions that obscure the developmental distinctiveness of the 60–80 phase.

Although there are no formal definitions distinguishing older workers, and age thresholds vary widely across research contexts (Brader, 2022; Stein & Rocco, 2001), this paper adopts a distinction commonly used in career development practice, and set out in Box 1, between midlife (approximately 45–60 years) and later life (60+ years) (Brown & Freedman, 2024). While midlife transitions have been widely examined (Infurna et al., 2020; Lachman, 2004; Walker, 2019), the developmental landscape of later life remains comparatively under-theorised.

Later life is not psychologically uniform, yet many lifespan and gerontological frameworks continue to treat it as a single, extended stage (Baltes, 1987; Cohen, 2005; Neugarten, 1974). In contrast, the period between approximately 60 and 80 years can be understood as a distinct developmental phase, characterised by identifiable psychological markers that differentiate it from both the preceding decade and advanced old age.

The years immediately preceding this phase, particularly the late fifties, are often marked by identity disentangling, role renegotiation, and efforts to consolidate or reinvent earlier life structures. From around age sixty onward, however, the orientation commonly shifts from reinvention toward reorientation. While chronological age provides a useful marker, these changes are better understood as stage-related rather than strictly age-determined, with considerable individual variation in timing.

Common markers of the 60–80 phase include increased discernment in the use of time and energy, a shift from optimisation and accumulation toward meaning and sufficiency, and heightened attentiveness to what sustains rather than depletes. Rather than withdrawal, this period often involves more selective engagement with work, relationships, and contribution, consistent with findings from socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1993, 2021) and later-life meaning research (Frankl, 2004; McAdams, 2001; Tornstam, 2005). In advanced old age, typically beyond the late seventies or eighties, the developmental terrain shifts again, with greater likelihood of physical contraction, dependency, and higher density of loss, accompanied by different psychological and support needs.

Recognising the 60–80 period as a distinct phase therefore allows for a more precise understanding of later-life development, one that acknowledges both continuity and change without defaulting to narratives of decline or perpetual productivity. While this paper focuses specifically on the 60–80 phase, it is situated within a broader life-course perspective that recognises multiple later-life stages. ThriveSpan is proposed as a within-stage framework for navigating the psychological, relational, and existential terrain of this particular phase.

Review of key life-stage and ageing theories

A wide range of psychological and career development theories have sought to explain how individuals grow, change, and adapt across the lifespan. Many were groundbreaking in their recognition that development continues into adulthood and later life. However, when viewed through the lens of contemporary longevity, their limitations become more apparent, particularly in relation to the extended and heterogeneous period of early later life. This section reviews selected theories that have shaped thinking about adult development, focusing on how later life has been conceptualised and where theoretical gaps remain.

The review that follows examines each theory on its own terms, assessing its contribution to understanding later life while identifying conceptual limitations in relation to the contemporary 60–80 phase. In response to the gaps identified, this paper proposes ThriveSpan, an integrative framework designed specifically for this developmental period. ThriveSpan comprises nine dimensions organised across three interconnected paths: Self and Wellbeing, Connection and Contribution, and Exploration and Fulfilment. Throughout the review, brief observations are made about how ThriveSpan builds on or extends beyond each theory, with full details of the framework provided in Sections 3 and 4.

Erikson's psychosocial stages of development

Erikson's psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1982) remains one of the most influential lifespan models in psychology. His eight-stage framework conceptualised development as a sequence of psychosocial tasks extending across the life course. Of particular relevance to later life is the stage of integrity versus despair, which emphasises reflection, life review, and the integration of lived experience into a coherent whole.

Erikson's contribution lies in recognising later life as a period of meaning-making rather than psychological stasis. The concept of ego integrity captures the capacity to accept one's life as it has been lived, while despair reflects regret, bitterness, or fear of death. These ideas continue to resonate with later-life accounts that foreground reflection, coherence, and existential evaluation.

However, Erikson's model compresses later life into a single developmental stage, implying a relatively uniform psychological task across what may span several decades. The lived experience of individuals in their early sixties, often still physically capable and future-oriented, differs markedly from that of those in advanced old age facing increased frailty and dependency. Yet both are subsumed within the same frame.

Joan Erikson's later addition of a ninth stage acknowledged the complexities of very old age, including physical decline and the need for what she termed 'vital involvement' (Erikson et al., 1986). While this extension recognised greater heterogeneity, it continued to reflect a historical context in which retirement was shorter and later-life meaning was strongly oriented toward family lineage. In the context of extended longevity and more diverse life courses, Erikson's framework offers limited differentiation across the decades following full-time work, a gap that contemporary later-life models must address.

Super's life-span, life-space theory of career development

Super's life-span, life-space theory (Super, 1990) represented a major advance in vocational psychology by situating career development within the broader context of life roles and stages. He conceptualised career as a lifelong process and proposed stages including growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline, later reframed as disengagement.

The model was empirically grounded and reflected mid-twentieth-century labour market conditions, characterised by linear careers and fixed retirement ages. Within this context, positioning later life as a period of maintenance followed by withdrawal was culturally and structurally coherent.

In contemporary contexts, however, this framing has become increasingly limited. Many individuals now work beyond traditional retirement ages, engage in portfolio careers, or pursue forms of contribution that extend beyond paid employment. More fundamentally, Super's model remains primarily occupational in focus and does not engage with the existential, identity-related, and meaning-based questions that often come to the fore during the extended post-work period of later life.

Super's later Life-Career Rainbow broadened career theory by recognising multiple simultaneous roles across the lifespan, including family, community, and civic identities (Super, 1990). While this represented important conceptual progress, the model continued to frame later life primarily through occupational disengagement and did not theorise the post-work period as a distinct developmental phase with its own psychological terrain. As such, while Super's work remains foundational for career development, it does not adequately capture the expanded and psychologically complex nature of contemporary later life.

Levinson's life structure and transitional model

Levinson's theory of adult development emphasised life as a sequence of relatively stable periods punctuated by transitions (Levinson, 1978; 1996). His concept of life structure described the pattern of roles, relationships, and aspirations that organise an individual's life at a given time. Levinson identified a Late Adult Transition around ages 60–65, followed by Late Adulthood, thereby recognising that development continues into later life.

A key strength of Levinson's model lies in its normalisation of reappraisal and restructuring as ongoing features of adult development. His work helped legitimate questioning and reorientation in later life, countering assumptions of developmental closure.

However, Levinson's treatment of later life remains limited. While he identified transition points around age sixty, he did not offer a sustained account of the psychological tasks or orientations characterising the extended period that follows. In addition, the concept of life structure remains anchored primarily in external roles and social organisation, such as work and family, rather than internal developmental processes. As a result, the model offers limited insight into the experiential, existential, and meaning-making dimensions that often become more salient as traditional structural markers recede. ThriveSpan addresses this gap by extending beyond life structure to encompass the varied ways individuals may orient toward thriving in later life.

Baltes' lifespan development perspective

Baltes' lifespan developmental perspective emphasises that development involves both gains and losses across all stages of life (Baltes, 1987, 1997). His model of selection, optimisation, and compensation (SOC) describes how individuals adapt to changing internal and external resources by prioritising goals, enhancing capacities, and compensating for limitations (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Central to this framework is the proposition that developmental change reflects the joint occurrence of gain and loss. While gains tend to predominate earlier in life, losses become more prominent in later years. Crucially, development does not cease but continues as a dynamic process of adaptation rather than simple decline. Baltes also emphasised the

multi-directionality of development, whereby different capacities may follow divergent trajectories within the same life phase. For example, declines in processing speed may coexist with growth in emotional regulation, practical judgement, or crystallised knowledge.

Baltes' work provides important theoretical grounding for understanding adaptation and agency in later life and offers a clear challenge to deficit-based models of ageing. However, the framework is primarily functional rather than existential or experiential. It explains how individuals adapt to changing resources but does not address why particular domains are prioritised, nor how questions of meaning, identity, and existential orientation are experienced. ThriveSpan builds on Baltes' recognition of adaptive capacity while extending into the domains of meaning-making and psychological interiority that his model leaves largely unaddressed.

Socioemotional selectivity theory

Carstensen's socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) provides influential insight into motivational shifts associated with perceived time horizons (Carstensen, 1993; Carstensen et al., 1999). According to SST, when time is perceived as expansive, individuals prioritise knowledge acquisition and exploration, whereas when time is perceived as limited, emotional goals become more salient. With increasing awareness of finitude, people prioritise emotionally meaningful relationships, present-focused experience, and emotional wellbeing (Carstensen, 2021).

This shift reflects adaptive reorientation rather than withdrawal. Empirical research demonstrates that older adults proactively reduce peripheral social ties while maintaining or deepening emotionally close relationships (Carstensen, 1992; Lang & Carstensen, 1994). This selectivity is associated with improved emotional regulation, fewer negative emotions, and greater emotional complexity compared to younger adults (Carstensen & Charles, 1998; Carstensen et al., 2000). Experimental studies further suggest that perceived time, rather than chronological age alone, drives these motivational changes (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990).

SST challenges deficit narratives by demonstrating that emotional functioning often remains stable or improves with age. Phenomena such as the 'positivity effect' and the capacity to hold mixed emotions simultaneously reflect goal-directed attention rather than cognitive decline (Reed et al., 2014). For ThriveSpan, SST provides strong empirical grounding for the claim that the 60–80 phase involves not merely coping with limitation but active reorientation toward emotional depth, relational quality, and present-focused engagement. It helps explain why later life often calls for different priorities from those assumed in occupational career models centred on expansion and future-oriented achievement.

Gerotranscendence and meaning-based approaches

Tornstam's theory of gerotranscendence offers a complementary perspective on later-life development, focusing on meaning-making, wisdom, and existential reorientation (Tornstam, 2005). Gerotranscendence describes a shift from materialistic, achievement-oriented values toward a more contemplative perspective characterised by increased interiority, reduced emphasis on external validation, and heightened awareness of life's interconnectedness.

Research grounded in this theory suggests that such changes are not signs of disengagement but reflect developmental maturation. Higher levels of gerotranscendence are associated with decreased materialism, reduced fear of death, greater acceptance of ambiguity, and increased selectivity in social relationships (Tornstam, 2005). While these patterns overlap with socioemotional selectivity, gerotranscendence extends the analysis into existential and spiritual domains, challenging cultural assumptions that equate successful ageing with continued activity and productivity defined in midlife terms.

For ThriveSpan, gerotranscendence offers theoretical support for understanding inward-focused meaning-making as a legitimate mode of thriving in later life. Reduced emphasis on accumulation, increased comfort with reflection or solitude, and prioritisation of being over doing need not signify withdrawal from life, but rather engagement with greater depth and coherence. While gerotranscendence emphasises transcendence and cosmic connection, and ThriveSpan also includes more active expressions such as creativity and contribution, both frameworks support the recognition of multiple valid modes of thriving during the 60–80 phase.

Cohen's developmental intelligence and later-life phase differentiation

Cohen's work on developmental intelligence represents a significant attempt to differentiate later life into multiple phases rather than treating it as a single, undifferentiated period (Cohen, 2005). He proposed four fluid phases of adult maturity, ranging from midlife re-evaluation to liberation, summing up, and later-life encore, emphasising variability and overlap rather than fixed sequencing.

Cohen grounded this framework in neuroscientific research demonstrating continued brain plasticity well into later life, challenging deficit-based assumptions about cognitive decline. The phases of liberation and summing up, in particular, resonate with later-life accounts of experimentation, reflection, and desire for contribution.

However, Cohen's model presents limitations when applied to the contemporary 60–80 life phase. The age ranges associated with his phases are broad and heavily overlapping, making it difficult to identify distinct psychological markers or developmental tasks within this extended period. As a result, substantial differences between early later life and advanced old age remain insufficiently specified.

More broadly, Cohen's work reflects a wider tendency in lifespan models to aggregate large portions of later life into broad categories. Such approaches risk obscuring the meaningful transitions that occur between the early sixties and late seventies, despite significant differences in orientation, energy, and existential awareness. While Cohen's framework validates the principle that later life comprises multiple phases, it does not offer the level of precision required to theorise the 60–80 period as a distinct developmental terrain.

ThriveSpan builds on this recognition of later-life differentiation while offering a more focused and psychologically grounded articulation of the 60–80 phase, characterised by heightened time awareness, selective engagement, increased discernment in the use of energy, and a shift from optimisation toward meaning and sufficiency.

Summary of theories

The theories reviewed in this section have each made important contributions to understanding development across the lifespan, illuminating processes such as adaptation, reflection, motivational change, meaning-making, and later-life differentiation. However, none provide an integrated or sufficiently differentiated account of the extended and psychologically distinctive 60–80 life phase.

Stage models tend to compress later life into a single developmental period, while career development theories focus primarily on occupational exit rather than the prolonged post-work phase. Process-oriented models explain adaptive mechanisms but give limited attention to existential and identity-related dimensions. Motivational and meaning-based theories address specific facets of later-life reorientation but do not offer a comprehensive framework spanning wellbeing, identity, and purpose.

What remains needed is an integrative framework that reflects contemporary longevity and captures the multidimensional nature of thriving during this distinctive developmental period. This conceptual gap provides the context for the development of ThriveSpan, introduced in the sections that follow.

The conceptual gap in the 60–80 Life phase

Gerontological research has long acknowledged that later life is not uniform, often distinguishing between the 'young-old' and the 'old-old' to capture differences in health, functional capacity, and dependency. However, this distinction has remained largely descriptive rather than developmental. While existing life-stage and ageing theories offer valuable insights, they leave a significant conceptual gap in relation to the 60–80 life phase, which is frequently subsumed under broad categories such as 'later life' or 'old age' despite being psychologically, socially, and existentially distinctive.

This lack of differentiation reflects, in part, the historical embeddedness of developmental theory. As Baltes (1987) observed, development is shaped not only by age-graded influences but also by history-graded and non-normative factors. The contemporary 60–80 phase differs markedly from the same chronological period in earlier generations, shaped by increased longevity, altered retirement structures, evolving family configurations, and changing expectations of later life. Even frameworks that attempt later-life phase differentiation have struggled to specify clear boundaries or articulate the distinctive developmental characteristics of this period. As a result, theoretical models developed in earlier demographic contexts often inadequately capture the lived reality of this phase today.

The 60–80 life phase is not simply an extension of midlife, nor is it synonymous with advanced old age. For many individuals, it is characterised by relatively good physical health, cognitive capacity, and functional independence, alongside increasing awareness of mortality, finitude, and change. This coexistence of vitality and vulnerability creates a particular psychological tension that is poorly captured by models framing later life primarily in terms of disengagement, decline, or retrospective evaluation.

During this phase, individuals often navigate multiple and sometimes competing realities. They may feel capable, curious, and future-oriented while simultaneously becoming more aware of ageing bodies, shifting social roles, and the limits of time. Relationships with

work, identity, and contribution are frequently renegotiated, not always through discrete transitions such as retirement, but through gradual reorientation of values and priorities. For some, this involves continued paid or unpaid work; for others, stepping back from roles that once provided structure and recognition without yet having new ones fully formed.

The relational landscape is similarly complex. Many people in their sixties and seventies hold responsibilities across generations, supporting ageing parents while remaining engaged with adult children, alongside changes in intimate and social relationships. Experiences of loss, through bereavement, declining health among peers, or contraction of social networks, become more visible during this period and often prompt reflection on belonging, connection, and loneliness, including the recognition that loneliness can occur even in the presence of others.

Crucially, the 60–80 phase is often marked by a shift in psychological orientation rather than by a single transition point. Instead of asking how to achieve more or progress further, individuals may increasingly ask how to live well, how to integrate past experiences, and how to align daily life with what now feels meaningful. These questions are not necessarily crisis-driven but reflect increased perspective, involving a movement from accumulation toward discernment and from external validation toward inner coherence.

Despite these distinctive features, the 60–80 life phase remains under-theorised. Psychosocial stage models tend to aggregate it with later old age, career development theories focus primarily on exit from work rather than the extended period that follows, and process-oriented theories explain adaptation without fully addressing existential and identity-related concerns. Popular contemporary narratives often emphasise reinvention, positivity, or agelessness, risking the marginalisation of reflection, ambiguity, and limits.

This lack of conceptual clarity has practical consequences. Without frameworks that reflect the lived experience of this phase, individuals may struggle to make sense of their own transitions, and practitioners lack adequate conceptual tools for supporting later-life development. ThriveSpan responds to this gap by offering an integrative framework that speaks directly to the psychological, relational, and existential realities of the 60–80 life phase. Its foundations are outlined in the following section.

Rationale for the Development of ThriveSpan

In response to this conceptual gap, the ThriveSpan framework emerged from a combination of doctoral research (Taylor, 2021, 2023, 2026) and three decades of practice as a career and later-life psychologist working with adults in midlife and beyond. It represents an integrative synthesis of empirical research, practice-based insight, and established psychological theory, developed to address recurring patterns not adequately captured by existing lifespan or retirement models.

As outlined in the preceding sections, prevailing theories offer limited guidance for understanding the 60–80 phase as a psychologically distinctive period. Many frame later life through disengagement or compress it into a single stage, while attempts at phase differentiation often rely on imprecise boundaries. Career development theories, in particular, continue to prioritise occupational identity, leaving questions of meaning, coherence, and inner alignment relatively underexplored.

In practice, individuals in their sixties and seventies frequently present with concerns that sit outside these frameworks. These rarely centre on career advancement or reinvention alone, but instead involve how to live well with increased awareness of time, how to integrate past achievements and losses, how to remain connected and contribute without depletion, and how to shape a life that feels coherent rather than merely busy. Conceptual gaps in the literature were often mirrored by uncertainties expressed in applied settings, suggesting a convergence between theoretical limitation and lived experience.

Doctoral research exploring how individuals construct meaning after the end of full-time work reinforced these observations (Taylor, 2021). This qualitative study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis with seven participants who had retired within the previous decade and self-identified as having found meaning in later life. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' lived experiences, revealing three superordinate themes: search for knowledge, a change in time, and who am I? Meaning in later life emerged as an ongoing process of reflection, integration, and adjustment, shaped by health, relationships, autonomy, contribution, and the capacity to live in alignment with personal values. Participants' accounts frequently reflected a desire for spaciousness and depth rather than acceleration, and for frameworks that supported discernment rather than prescription.

ThriveSpan was therefore not developed as a replacement for existing theories, nor as a universal model of ageing. Instead, it arose from the recognition that contemporary later life requires conceptual tools that are both psychologically grounded and experientially resonant. The framework holds together vitality and vulnerability, agency and limitation, and continuity and change, without imposing narratives of decline, compulsory positivity, or perpetual reinvention.

Focused specifically on the 60–80 phase, ThriveSpan brings together nine dimensions organised across three interconnected paths: Self and Wellbeing, Connection and Contribution, and Exploration and Fulfilment. This structure reflects a deliberate resistance to overly instrumental accounts of later life. ThriveSpan does not assume that development must be externally visible, measurable, or productivity-driven. It recognises that thriving in later life may involve refinement, contraction, or quiet realignment as much as expansion, encompassing wellbeing, meaning-making, autonomy, relationships, contribution, creativity, and time awareness within a coherent whole.

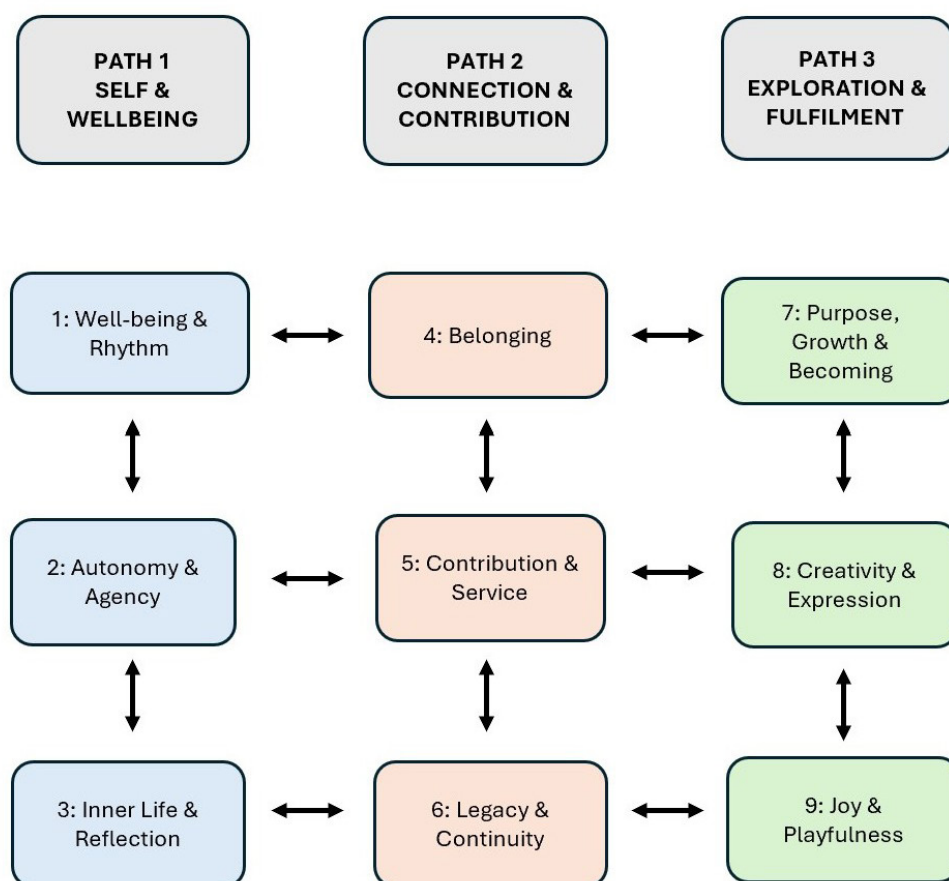
Rather than prescribing a single pathway through later life, ThriveSpan offers a flexible structure for understanding how individuals may reorient their lives in ways that are sustainable, internally aligned, and responsive to changing capacities and priorities. It acknowledges that thriving in this phase may take diverse forms, and that vitality and depth can coexist with vulnerability and limitation.

Theoretical foundations of the ThriveSpan domains

Having established the purpose and orientation of ThriveSpan as a flexible, non-instrumental framework for the 60–80 life phase, this section outlines the theoretical foundations underpinning its domains. The ThriveSpan domains are grounded in an integrative body of psychological, wellbeing, and meaning-focused theory rather than in any single disciplinary tradition.

In practical terms, ThriveSpan comprises nine interlocking domains organised across three interconnected paths. Self and Wellbeing includes wellbeing and rhythm, autonomy and agency, and inner life and reflection. Connection and Contribution encompasses belonging, contribution and service, and legacy and continuity. Exploration and Fulfilment includes purpose, growth and becoming, creativity and expression, and joy and playfulness.

Figure 1. The ThriveSpan Framework. Nine dimensions across three interconnected paths



The arrows reflect the fluid, non-hierarchical and interconnected nature of ThriveSpan. The dimensions can be entered in any order and often overlap in lived experience

These domains are not conceived as stages or tasks to be completed, but as interrelated aspects of later-life experience that may move into the foreground at different times, depending on individual circumstances, capacities, and priorities. They were identified through an integrative synthesis of psychological theory, empirical research on meaning and wellbeing, and sustained engagement with lived experience in later life. The theoretical foundations informing the domains are outlined below.

Wellbeing as a multidimensional and interdependent construct

Across lifespan psychology, wellbeing is understood as multidimensional rather than singular. Psychological models emphasise autonomy, purpose, personal growth, and self-acceptance, while relational perspectives highlight connection, belonging, and contribution (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Health psychology further underscores the role of physical capacity, energy, and bodily awareness in enabling engagement with life, particularly in later years (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

This multidimensional understanding of wellbeing is also reflected in contemporary policy frameworks. The OECD defines subjective wellbeing as encompassing life evaluation, affect, and eudaimonia, and emphasises its interdependence with health, social connection, autonomy, and broader life conditions rather than treating it as a standalone outcome (OECD, 2025).

ThriveSpan draws these strands together by treating wellbeing in later life as interdependent rather than additive. Changes in physical health can reshape identity, autonomy, and social participation, while shifts in purpose, meaning, or connection can influence emotional and physical vitality. Wellbeing is therefore understood not as a discrete outcome to be optimised, but as a dynamic condition shaped by the interaction of multiple life domains over time.

Identity, continuity, adaptation, and autonomy

Research on ageing and identity suggests that later life involves an ongoing negotiation between continuity and adaptation. Individuals seek to remain recognisably themselves while responding to change, loss, and new constraints (Erikson, 1982). This process is best understood as dynamic integration rather than static preservation, incorporating new realities while maintaining narrative coherence.

Baltes' model of selection, optimisation, and compensation provides a valuable account of adaptive functioning in later life (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). However, while it explains how individuals adjust to changing resources, it does not fully address the subjective and existential dimensions of these choices, including how adaptation is experienced in relation to identity, meaning, and selfhood.

ThriveSpan extends this functional perspective by explicitly supporting reflection on who one has been, who one is becoming, and how these identities can be integrated with changing capacities and priorities. Autonomy is understood not as unlimited choice, but as alignment between values, capacities, and lived reality. In this way, ThriveSpan allows for agency within constraint, without assuming either wholesale reinvention or passive acceptance.

Meaning-making and existential orientation in later life

Meaning-making research provides a central foundation for ThriveSpan. Studies consistently show that meaning in later life is constructed through multiple pathways, including relationships, contribution, creativity, reflection, and engagement with what feels larger than the self (Frankl, 2004; McAdams, 2001; Tornstam, 2005). Compared with earlier life stages, meaning in later life is often less oriented toward striving or achievement and more toward coherence, alignment, and presence. Recent conceptual work on fulfilment reinforces this shift, framing later-life meaning less in terms of future-oriented accomplishment and more in terms of coherence, congruence, and perceived value across the life as a whole (Baumann & Ruch, 2025)

Frankl's emphasis on the discovery rather than invention of meaning resonates strongly with later-life accounts, in which individuals often describe recognising what has always mattered rather than creating new purpose from scratch. McAdams' narrative identity framework similarly highlights the importance of integrating past and present into a coherent life story as future time narrows.

ThriveSpan reflects this shift by orienting attention toward what matters now rather than toward externally defined goals or outcomes. Meaning-making is addressed explicitly through the Purpose, Growth and Becoming, Inner Life and Reflection, and Legacy and Continuity domains, recognising meaning as an ongoing process of integration shaped by accumulated experience, loss, and increasing awareness of finitude.

Relational depth, belonging, and selective engagement

Later life is frequently characterised by changes in social networks and relational priorities. As demonstrated by socioemotional selectivity theory, increasing awareness of limited time leads individuals to prioritise emotionally meaningful relationships over broader social engagement (Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen et al., 2003). This pattern reflects adaptive reorientation rather than social withdrawal.

This reorientation is also reflected in recent fulfilment research. Baumann and Ruch (2025) argue that fulfilment in later life is increasingly grounded in relational depth, alignment with personal values, and a sense that one's life has mattered, rather than in role accumulation or activity volume. Fulfilment is thus shaped less by the breadth of engagement and more by the experienced quality, reciprocity, and meaning of connection.

ThriveSpan incorporates this insight while extending beyond network size to encompass relational depth, reciprocity and emotional literacy. It recognises that belonging is not solely a function of contact or activity, and that loneliness can occur even in the presence of others. The framework therefore attends to the quality of connection across friendship, intimacy, community, and contribution, and to how these relational patterns may shift during the 60–80 phase.

Health, capacity, and embodiment as enabling conditions

Within ThriveSpan, health is treated not as a separate or purely medicalised domain, but as an enabling condition that interacts with all other aspects of life. This perspective aligns with contemporary gerontological and health psychology approaches that view health as lived experience rather than simply the absence of illness (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Ryff & Singer, 1998).

By acknowledging the role of physical energy, mobility, and bodily maintenance without allowing these factors to dominate the narrative, ThriveSpan avoids both denial of ageing and reduction of later life to bodily decline. Health is understood as shaping what is possible, influencing rhythm, choice, and engagement, while remaining one dimension among many rather than the defining feature of later life.

This approach reflects Baltes' emphasis on plasticity and developmental reserve capacity, recognising that adaptive potential remains present in later life, albeit within changing limits. ThriveSpan therefore attends to enabling conditions rather than assuming fixed limitations, supporting intentional adjustment and realistic cultivation of wellbeing.

Narrative integration, reflection, and time awareness

Narrative approaches to ageing provide a further foundation for ThriveSpan. Later life offers a distinctive opportunity to integrate accumulated experience, transitions, and losses

into a coherent narrative that connects past, present, and anticipated futures (McAdams, 2001; Erikson et al., 1986). As future time narrows, unresolved narrative threads often take on greater psychological significance.

ThriveSpan supports this integrative process through its emphasis on reflection and time awareness, particularly within the Inner Life and Reflection and Legacy and Continuity domains. Awareness of finitude is treated not as a source of despair, but as a context that can sharpen discernment, deepen presence, and inform choices about how life is lived now.

Integrative positioning of the ThriveSpan domains

Taken together, the ThriveSpan domains represent an intentional synthesis of established psychological theory, empirical research on meaning and wellbeing, and sustained attention to lived experience in the 60–80 life phase. Each domain is grounded in multiple theoretical traditions, while collectively they reflect the interdependent nature of thriving in later life.

ThriveSpan is therefore best understood not as a checklist of areas to optimise, but as a reflective map that supports depth, discernment, and intentional living. By holding multiple domains in relationship rather than isolation, the framework offers an integrative lens for understanding the 60–80 phase, one that honours its variability, complexity, and developmental distinctiveness.

Discussion and conclusion

The review of life-stage theories and the development of ThriveSpan highlight a broader challenge in how later life is conceptualised and supported. While psychological and career development frameworks have made substantial contributions to understanding adult development, many remain poorly aligned with contemporary longevity and with the lived experience of individuals in the 60–80 life phase. ThriveSpan responds to this gap not by rejecting earlier theory, but by reworking and integrating existing perspectives in light of current demographic, social, and psychological realities.

This need for conceptual updating reflects Baltes' argument that lifespan development is shaped not only by age-graded influences, but also by history-graded and nonnormative factors (Baltes, 1987). Although biological ageing remains significant, its effects interact with historical context and individual life histories to produce considerable heterogeneity. The contemporary 60–80 phase is therefore not simply a biological stage but a historically situated and individually variable developmental terrain. ThriveSpan reflects this complexity by accommodating diversity without prescribing a single normative pathway, recognising that later life is shaped by what has come before as well as by the times in which one is ageing.

Conceptual work of this kind begins with language. Models that frame later life primarily in terms of decline, disengagement, or perpetual reinvention can unintentionally narrow the range of experiences recognised as legitimate (Gullette, 2004; Holstein & Minkler, 2003). ThriveSpan supports a more expansive vocabulary, one that allows for vitality alongside vulnerability, reflection alongside engagement, and discernment alongside contribution. Such shifts in language matter in practice, shaping how individuals interpret their own experiences, how practitioners frame conversations, and how later-life support is designed and delivered.

For practitioners working in coaching, guidance, or later-life development contexts, ThriveSpan offers a structure capable of holding complexity without overwhelming. Rather than directing individuals towards predefined outcomes, it supports reflective inquiry across multiple interrelated domains, aligning with evidence that later-life wellbeing is best supported through meaning-making, autonomy, and relational depth rather than through narrowly defined productivity goals (Ryff, 1989; Carstensen, 2006; Frankl, 2004). Used in this way, ThriveSpan functions as a conversational map, enabling individuals to explore what matters now and where attention may be most needed, without imposing a prescriptive model of ageing.

The framework also highlights the importance of clearer differentiation within later life. Administrative categories such as '65+' or broad cultural references to 'old age' obscure substantial variation in lived experience, psychological orientation, and developmental task (Neugarten, 1974). While earlier formulations of the 'young-old' extended into the mid-seventies, continued improvements in health, later retirement, and changing social expectations support recognising the 60–80 period as a distinct developmental phase. This differentiation reflects the observation that individuals in their mid-to-late seventies often share more psychological and functional commonality with those in their sixties than with those in advanced old age. By articulating the 60–80 phase more precisely, ThriveSpan responds to this flattening and offers a framework that better reflects contemporary longevity.

ThriveSpan also reframes how transitions in later life are understood. Events such as retirement, health changes, or shifts in family roles are often treated as discrete turning points (Atchley, 1989; Wang & Shi, 2014). In contrast, the framework encourages viewing later life as an extended phase of orientation and integration. This perspective moves beyond binary narratives such as work versus retirement or independence versus dependence and allows for fluid movement between roles, capacities, and priorities over time.

At a conceptual level, ThriveSpan contributes to debates within psychology and ageing studies by explicitly addressing the under-theorised 60–80 life phase. By differentiating this period from both midlife and advanced old age, it challenges the tendency to flatten later life into overly broad categories and brings greater attention to meaning, identity, and lived coherence during early later life.

Finally, the development of ThriveSpan underscores the value of integrating lived experience with theory. Later life is not only an object of academic inquiry but a domain of ongoing personal and collective negotiation (McAdams, 2001; Baars, 2012). Frameworks that emerge from sustained engagement with this reality are better positioned to support individuals navigating the psychological, relational, and existential dimensions of ageing. ThriveSpan represents one such contribution, offering a reflective structure intended to accompany, rather than prescribe, the unfolding of later life in an era of extended longevity.

Limitations and future directions

While ThriveSpan is grounded primarily in Western psychological and career development traditions, this necessarily brings cultural assumptions that merit acknowledgement. Much of the lifespan and career theory on which it draws has emerged from individualistic, market-oriented societies, where identity and paid work are often privileged.

Non-Western lifespan models offer important complementary perspectives. Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani's (2004) account of the four Indian *ashramas* conceptualises life as a developmental journey encompassing learning, householding, societal service, and spiritual orientation. While there is some correspondence with Erikson's concept of generativity, the Indian framework extends this by embedding value, contribution, and transcendence as normative aspects of later life rather than optional concerns.

As a conceptual and practice-informed framework, ThriveSpan is not presented as a definitive or exhaustive model of later-life development. Several limitations warrant acknowledgement.

First, although the framework is grounded in established psychological theory and informed by qualitative research on meaning in later life, it has not yet been subject to systematic empirical validation. Future research could examine how the ThriveSpan domains are experienced, interpreted, and prioritised across different later-life contexts and populations.

Second, ThriveSpan focuses specifically on the 60–80 life phase within contexts of relative resource availability and choice. Its applicability may be more limited in circumstances of severe economic constraint, systemic marginalisation, or advanced frailty, where agency and reflective capacity are significantly constrained.

Third, while ThriveSpan is designed to accommodate individual variability, it does not directly address the structural inequalities that shape access to thriving in later life, including disparities in health, income, social support, and cumulative disadvantage across the life course. Future work might explore how the framework could inform interventions, services, or policy approaches that attend to these broader determinants of later-life wellbeing.

Fourth, longitudinal research would strengthen understanding of how engagement with the ThriveSpan domains shifts over time, particularly as individuals move from the 60–80 phase into more advanced old age. Such work could clarify both the framework's utility and its boundaries, indicating where different conceptual models may become more appropriate.

Finally, ThriveSpan's focus on the 60–80 phase represents both a strength and a limitation. While this precision addresses the tendency of existing models to aggregate later life into overly broad categories, it raises questions about boundary flexibility. Psychological markers associated with this phase, such as heightened time awareness, selective engagement, and movement from accumulation toward meaning, may emerge earlier or later depending on health, life circumstances, and cultural context. Chronological age therefore serves as a practical marker rather than a definitive boundary, and future research could examine whether these markers cluster predictably around this period or are better understood through psychological criteria alone.



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