



Patterns of social engagement in the transition to later life

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ABSTRACT

As social roles in later life are shaped by significant life events and changes occurring in the late-life transition, examining social engagement in midlife may provide a context for interpreting the ageing social identity. This is particularly important for women, who are heavily dependent on social relationships and are more influenced by social losses and change.

Objective: To examine major social changes occurring in the decade prior to late-life, starting from approximately 45–55 years of age.

Study design: The study accessed data from the longitudinal prospective Women's Healthy Ageing Project (WHAP). Participants were 493 women who had completed at least one assessment in the first 12 years of the study.

Results: Living with a partner was common and stable amongst participants, while the proportion with children still at home decreased markedly (79–44%). Full-time employment also decreased as participants approached the average retirement age (40–13%). Volunteer work was popular throughout the study, increasing slightly with age, and minding grandchildren was common at the end of the study period (80%).

Conclusions: Taken together, these findings suggest a notable deficit in participants' social lives as they transition into later life, but with some evidence of compensation by increasing other social activities.

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The transition from midlife to later life denotes a key shift in social roles. Many social relationships and roles are lost and social network sizes have been shown to reduce [1–3]. Key events in this stage may include retirement from the workforce, the death of a spouse or friends, and a decrease in participation in hobbies due to poor physical health [4–9].

The loss of social contacts is often self-perpetuating as the loss of one role can lead to the loss of others. Losing a companion may lead to lessened feelings of encouragement or security, leaving individuals unwilling to strike out on their own [10,11]. Furthermore, older adults may experience difficulty or feel a reluctance to form new social bonds so late in life, especially when they are mourning lost relationships [6]. These factors are especially poignant for older women, as women are more likely to suffer from losses such as widowhood and are more dependent on wider social contact for wellbeing [12–15]. The losses occurring in the transition to old age

can influence the shape of social activity in later life. In their discussion of widowhood, Van den Hoonaard et al. [12] highlighted the conceptualisation of loss as a process; moving through the events surrounding the loss, mourning, through to the reconstruction of the individual's social identity.

As later life social roles are shaped by significant life events and changes occurring in the late-life transition, examining social engagement in midlife may provide a context for interpreting the ageing social identity. Unfortunately, much of the work examining age-related changes to social roles is outdated and focuses on American or European populations. As social roles are heavily influenced by cultural factors, population-specific research is needed in order to inform research. The current study aimed to examine social roles in midlife in order to provide a context for social engagement in the mid-to-late life transition for Australians.

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Table 1
Description of WHAP social measures.

Social factor	Items
Employment	Currently employed Employment type (full-time, part-time, etc.) Non-employed status (retired, looking for work, etc.) Partner's employment status (full-time, retired, etc.)
Marital status	Single, married/de facto, divorced, widowed, separated
Household composition	Outlines all coresidents Changes to household occupants since last interview
Grandparenting	Number of grandchildren Minding grandchildren (number of grandchildren, frequency, activities)
Volunteerism	Current volunteer status Types of volunteering (verbatim)
Community organisations	Organisations that participant belongs to

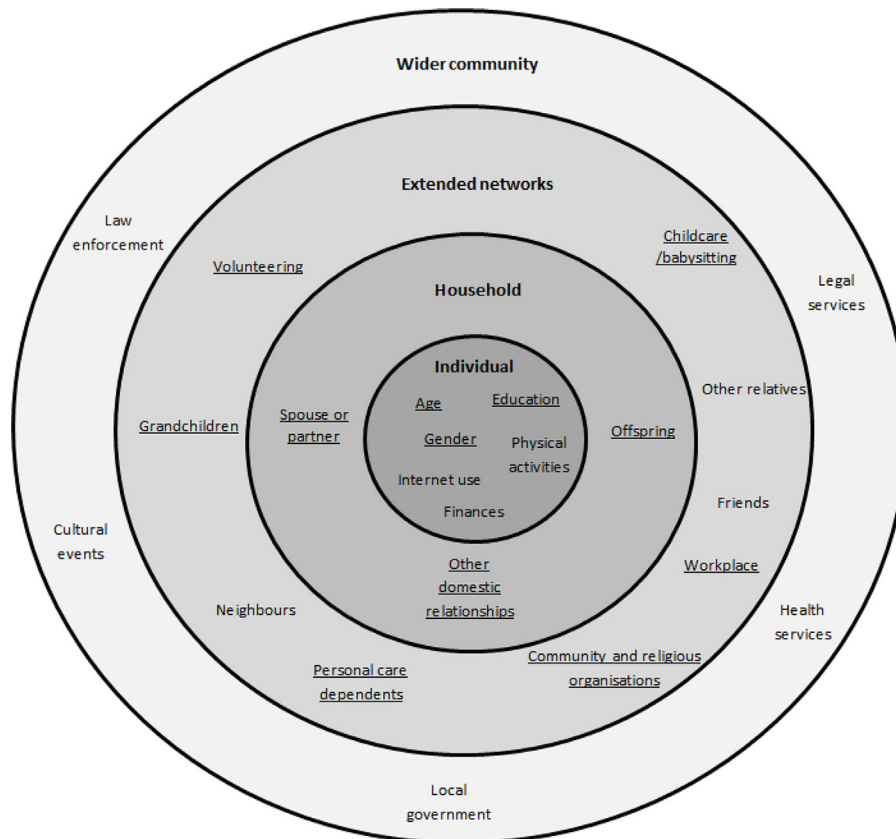


Fig. 1. Summary of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' [27] General Social Survey (GSS). The survey covers common social relationships, opportunities for social engagement or support, and factors that influence social participation. These items range from innate factors to factors that influence the general social conditions. The GSS items encompass the measures used in the World Health Organisation's [28] survey of the social determinants of mental health. Because this study examined social engagement, only items that involved direct personal contact were included (Household and Extended Networks items). Age, education, and gender were also included as part of the WHAP protocol. Data regarding contact with friends, neighbours, and other relatives was not available. The final selection of items for the WHAP protocol are shown underlined.

1. Methods

1.1. Participants

Participants were from the epidemiologically sampled longitudinal prospective Women's Healthy Ageing Project (WHAP) which was initiated as the Melbourne Women's Midlife Health Project. Briefly, a longitudinal cohort of Caucasian women within the Melbourne metropolitan area were identified by random telephone dialling in 1991 and re-interviewed annually over eight years then intermittently over five years. Details of the study protocol are outlined elsewhere [16].

1.2. Measures and procedure

Assessments were conducted according to the project protocol which has been previously published [16]. Participants were administered a core questionnaire at each timepoint. The questionnaires from each timepoint contained a selection from a pool of items assessing social activities, relationships, and environments, outlined in Table 1. These items are consistent with the Australian Bureau of Statistics' General Social Survey (GSS); a national survey of the opportunities and factors for active social participation (see Fig. 1). Items of interest to the current study included marital status, household composition, employment status, partners' employment status, participation in unpaid work, and grandparenting.

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