

Review

Menders, Not Just Consumers: Repositioning Older Adults as Contributors in the Circular Economy

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper questions the habit of casting older adults mainly as consumers within the silver and circular economies, and asks whether later life is better understood as a site of contribution as well as consumption. **Design/methodology/approach:** The paper is conceptual and discursive. It draws purposively on productive ageing and circular economy scholarship, sets the consumer and contributor framings in dialogue, and builds a conceptual model with propositions of stated evidential status. **Findings:** Many older adults hold a composite "circular capital" of repair, reuse, thrift and craft competencies that is unevenly distributed across the life course. Where an enabling and fairly governed opportunity structure exists, mobilising this capital can support wellbeing, generativity and social inclusion. Older people are positioned as multi-role actors rather than being fitted to a second narrow image. **Originality:** The paper defines circular capital and generative circularity, specifies safeguards against instrumentalisation, and offers a testable agenda for ageing and sustainability.

Keywords

Circular economy, Older adults, Productive ageing, Social inclusion, Generativity, Sustainability

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1. Introduction

Populations are ageing across most of the world, and this shift is often described as a market to be served. The silver economy encourages services, technology developers and policymakers to picture later life through spending, adoption and demand [1,2]. In parallel, the circular economy has grown from a niche idea into a mainstream response to resource pressure and crisis [3,4]. Where the two agendas meet, older people usually appear as buyers of age friendly green products, or as a segment whose acceptance of circular offers has to be won [5]. This paper treats that picture as incomplete, and as an awkward fit for a readership that works to help older people lead full, active lives and to value what they give to families and communities.

The question is not whether older adults consume. They do. The question is whether consumption is the whole story. The claim here is that later life often carries practical circular competence, the everyday habits of mending, reusing and making do, and that current thinking tends to overlook it. Repositioning older people as menders, and not only as consumers, changes how services are designed, how communities are convened, and how the contribution of older people is recognised.

Two points about method and scope should be made at the outset, since reviewers rightly press on both. First, the paper is a discursive conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review. It draws purposively on two literatures that have grown up apart, productive ageing and the circular economy, and reads each in the light of the other; it does not claim exhaustive coverage, and it flags counter evidence where that evidence bears on the argument. Second, the empirical claim is deliberately modest in reach. It concerns household and community scale circular practice, such as repair, reuse, thrift and the passing on of skills. It does not claim that older people can staff industrial circular systems, and later sections keep that boundary explicit. Throughout, older adults are treated as a highly varied population, and the argument is framed in life course and intersectional terms rather than as a generalisation about age.

2. Later Life as a Market: the Consumer Framing

The silver economy has done really good. It has drawn attention and investment to later life and has recast ageing as an opportunity rather than only a cost. Its underlying grammar, though, is transactional. Older adults are positioned as end users whose satisfaction, adoption and continued use are the outcomes that matter [1,2,6]. Studies of circular value propositions often frame the older person as someone whose willingness to accept a product or scheme is uncertain and must be improved [5,7].

This logic is reinforced by how the circular economy itself is theorised, as a system optimised by firms and shaped by managerial capability. Much work concentrates on the producer side: analytics capability, investment, eco innovation and the diffusion of smart technologies as the levers of transition [8-11]. Behavioural work tends to treat the individual as a decision maker to be nudged towards circular choices [12]. In this arrangement the older person sits at the demand end of a value chain designed elsewhere.

None of this work is wrong, and it should not be caricatured. Being a consumer is not the same as being passive, and, as section 6 argues, consumption and contribution frequently occur together. The difficulty is cumulative rather than local. Taken together, the literature builds a portrait of the older person as a cautious customer whose barriers must be lowered, and it does so almost to the exclusion of any portrait of the older person as a maker. For a practice audience that omission matters, because it shapes which interventions are imagined and which are never proposed.

3. Contribution in Later Life, and Its Risks

A second tradition treats later life as a period of contribution rather than only of receipt. Work on active and productive ageing documents the time, labour and knowledge that older people give to households and communities [13]. Scholarship on generativity, the concern to guide and provide for those who follow, treats the wish to pass something on as a defining and health-giving feature of later life [14]. The cultural expectation that older people hold and share wisdom points the same way [15]. Empirical accounts add detail: older people sustain food security and inclusion for one another in underserved areas [16], act as peer supporters in mental health interventions [17], and shape services directly when invited into co design [18].

This asset-based reading has a known hazard, and it must be named early. Productive ageing scholarship has long debated whether valuing older people by their output simply substitutes one instrumental frame for another. If the consumer frame prizes older people for what they buy, a contribution frame can slide into prizing them for what they can be made to produce. The position taken here is that recognising contribution should widen the recognition of later life personhood, not add a duty. Contribution has value when it is chosen and when it is not the only ground on which an older person is valued. Section 9 turns this principle into safeguards.

4. Defining Circular Capital

The circular economy is usually described through a family of R strategies, reduce, reuse, repair, refurbish, remanufacture and recycle, that keep materials in use and close loops [4,19,20]. If circular activity depends on repairing, reusing and repurposing, and if many older people hold exactly those competencies as a matter of biography, then later life is not only the demand end of circularity. It can also be one of its supply reservoirs. We call that reservoir circular capital.

Circular capital needs a firmer definition than a first pass allows, and reviewers are right to ask for it. We define it as the specific, materially oriented competence to keep objects and materials in use: repair and maintenance skills, reuse and thrift know how, and the tacit craft knowledge that guides them, together with the tools, time and social ties through which these are exercised. It is a composite and relational construct, and it is analytical rather than foundational; we do not propose a new basic form of capital alongside the classic ones. Table 1 sets out how it relates to and differs from human, social, cultural and experiential capital. The value of naming it is that these elements co-occur and are mobilised together in practice: a repair is skill plus tool plus a place to do it plus someone who values the result.

Table 1. Circular capital in relation to established forms of capital.

Form of capital	Core content	Relation to circular capital
Human capital	Education, general skills and health that raise productivity	Narrower and material: specific repair, reuse and maintenance competence
Social capital	Networks, trust and norms of reciprocity	Uses social ties as the setting for shared repair and reuse, but is not reducible to them
Cultural capital	Dispositions, tastes and credentials that signal status	Practical and low status rather than distinction seeking; thrift and mending are its habitus
Experiential / practical knowledge	Tacit know-how gained through doing	A core ingredient, applied specifically to keeping objects and materials in use
Circular capital (this paper)	Repair, reuse, thrift and craft competence, plus tools, time and ties	A composite, relational, analytical construct across individual, household, community and cohort levels; unevenly distributed

Source: Authors own work.

Two clarifications follow. First, circular capital is not a possession of age as such. It is distributed by cohort, class, gender, education, occupation, geography, culture, migration history, household form, disability and income, and it can decline as well as accumulate. Some older people hold a great deal of it; others never acquired it, or can no longer exercise it. A cohort effect is plausible, since adults who came of age before cheap disposability may more often have learned to mend and maintain, but this is a testable empirical claim, not a moral contrast between resourceful elders and wasteful youth, and it should not be romanticised. Second, circular capital operates at several levels at once, individual, household, community and cohort, and the level in play should be specified in any given study. Because possession is uneven, the useful questions are for whom, in what circumstances and in which settings circular capital exists and can be put to work.

5. Generative Circularity as a Mechanism

Naming a resource does not explain how it produces wellbeing. For that we propose generative circularity, and we are precise about what kind of thing it is. Generative circularity is a mechanism, a mediating pathway, not an outcome and not a restatement of generativity. It is the process by which taking part in circular activity engages the generative motive to make, mend and pass on, and in doing so yields meaning, connection and inclusion. In the model that follows, circular capital is an antecedent, participation is the activity, generative circularity is the mediator that links the two to wellbeing, and social inclusion and environmental effects are outcomes. Separating these terms matters, because it makes the pathway testable rather than circular: one can ask whether participation raises wellbeing only when the generative motive is engaged, and whether the effect weakens when activity is experienced as obligation rather than choice.

6. Beyond a Binary: Older Adults as Multi-Role Actors

It would be a mistake to answer one narrow image with another. Circular participation routinely mixes consumption and production. An older person may buy a repairable appliance, mend it, lend it through a community network, teach a neighbor the repair, and later buy a circular service. Purchasing does not make someone passive, and contributing does not place someone outside the market. The consumer and contributor framings are therefore best read as emphases, or ideal types, that foreground different aspects of the same person, rather than as a description of two kinds of people. Table 2 compares the two framings on that understanding, and the final row records the multi role reality that holds

them together. The contribution of this paper is not to overturn the consumer account but to restore the half of the picture it leaves out.

Table 2. Consumer and contributor framings of ageing in the circular economy, as ideal-typical emphases.

Dimension	Consumer framing (emphasis)	Contributor ("mender") framing (emphasis)
View of the older adult	Customer and end-user	Maker, repairer and knowledge-holder
Primary activity	Buying and adopting circular goods and services	Repairing, reusing and passing on skills
Direction of value	Value flows towards the older person	Value also flows from the older person to others
Policy emphasis	Growing the silver market; securing acceptance	Recognising and enabling contribution
Wellbeing mechanism	Satisfaction from consumption	Generative circularity: meaning, purpose, inclusion
Main risk	Productive capacity made invisible	Instrumentalisation; unpaid or unequal labour

Note: The two columns describe emphases, not two kinds of people. In practice older adults are multi-role actors who both consume and contribute. Source: Authors own work

7. Consumer Framing, Market Segmentation and Structural Ageism

An earlier version of this argument described the consumer framing as structural ageism. Reviewers are right that the term was doing more work than the evidence warranted, and we now draw finer distinctions. Ageist stereotyping is a belief about older people; age-based exclusion is a practice that keeps them out; paternalistic design assumes their incapacity; market segmentation treats them as a demand category; structural ageism is the harder claim that institutions are arranged so that later life is systematically disadvantaged. The consumer framing is, in the first instance, market segmentation shading into paternalistic design. It becomes a candidate for structural ageism only when it is built into the routines of services, funders and providers so that older people are rarely positioned to contribute in the first place. That stronger claim is conditional and empirical, and section 11 states it as such rather than asserting it [5].

8. The Socio-Technical Opportunity Structure: Enablers and Barriers

Whether circular capital can be mobilised depends less on individual motivation than on the surrounding opportunity structure, which is social and technical at once. Health and function shape the forms and intensity of participation a person can sustain [18]. Digital access matters, since many schemes are mediated by platforms and apps, and exclusion can shut people out at the door [2,6,21,22]. The relationship is not one directional, though: offline systems also exclude, through transport, distance, cost, language and information, and well-designed technology can widen access rather than only narrow it, so digital infrastructure is better seen as one component of the opportunity structure than as a fixed barrier. Physical and service design counts too, from age friendly and universally designed environments to inclusive mobility and thoughtfully designed living settings [23-26]. Beyond these, motivation, recognition, institutional support, community infrastructure, accessibility and safeguarding all condition whether participation happens and whether it is fair; the model in section 10 places them in the frame. Technical and organisational advances can widen or narrow the door depending on whether older people are designed in from the start [27-30]. Enabling older people's circular contribution is, in short, a design task and a governance task rather than a matter of willpower.

9. Safeguarding Contribution: Voluntariness, Recognition and the Risk of Exploitation

Because circular capital is a resource, there is a real danger that institutions treat it as free. If older people's skills, time and networks are folded into circular transitions without care, municipalities, care organisations and environmental programmes may come to rely on unpaid labour, and the load would fall hardest on older women, low-income older people and those already doing unpaid care. A growing critique of the circular economy makes exactly this point about the undervaluing of certain groups' work, and the warning transfers directly to later life [31]. Contribution has to be distinguished from exploitation, and voluntary participation from quiet obligation.

Practice offers a workable template, and it is worth describing how the common settings actually run. Repair cafes are typically free, drop in events where volunteers with practical skills help visitors fix household items alongside them, so that a repair is also a lesson. Tool libraries lend equipment and, often, the know how to use it. Reuse and upcycling hubs collect, refurbish and redistribute goods, and many run workshops. Most are community based or run by nonprofits, and they live or die on recognition and hospitality rather than on pay. Designing these settings well, then, means building in a set of safeguards: participation stays genuinely optional, with a right to refuse that is not read as a deficit; contributions are recognised, and where appropriate compensated, rather than assumed; safety, insurance and liability are handled; access is open across health, income and language; and safeguarding protects people who may be

vulnerable. The aim is contribution that is chosen, valued and fairly acknowledged, and outcomes that are watched for harm as well as benefit [16,18,25].

10. The Circular Contribution Model of Ageing

Figure 1 presents the revised model. It is not a simple production line. Circular capital is an antecedent that feeds participation in circular activities, which differ from one another and should not be flattened into a single category: a repair cafe, a tool library, a reuse hub and an intergenerational workshop vary in skill demands, organisation and likely outcomes. Participation is linked to outcomes, environmental and psychosocial, through the mediator of generative circularity and through social connection. The opportunity structure, health, digital and physical access, scheme design, recognition and compensation, institutional support, community infrastructure and safeguarding, moderates every step, and ageism sits among these moderators. Outcomes are not assumed to be uniformly good: the model marks boundary conditions and possible harms. A feedback loop runs from positive outcomes back to circular capital, since valued participation can renew skills, confidence and ties, but the loop is conditional on the safeguards above rather than automatic.

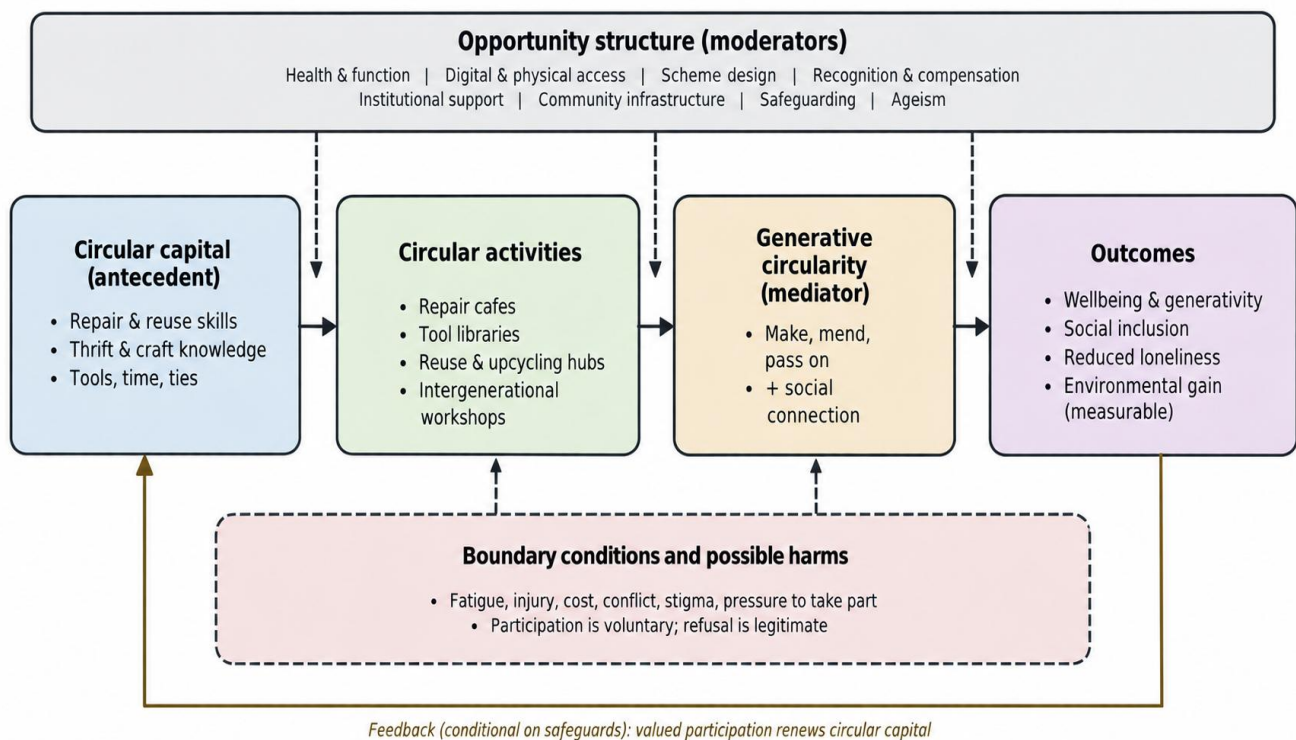


Figure 1. The circular contribution model of ageing.

11. Propositions and Their Evidential Status

The propositions below are offered as a research agenda, and each is labelled by how much existing evidence stands behind it, following the reviewers' fair request to separate what is supported from what is conjecture. Table 3 pairs each proposition with that status and with a concrete way to test it, including how circular capital might be measured.

P1. Relative to younger cohorts, current cohorts of older adults are more likely to hold certain repair, reuse and thrift competencies. This is a comparative, testable claim, not a settled finding, and it requires cross cohort measurement rather than assumption.

P2. Participation in circular activities supports wellbeing when it engages the generative motive, an association that is plausible and partly supported but not yet demonstrated as cause.

P3. Circular participation can build social connection and reduce loneliness, again as an association in need of causal test.

P4. The consumer framing of the silver and circular economies can operate as a mechanism of structural ageism, but only where it is embedded in institutions in ways that foreclose contribution; this is a conditional claim.

P5. Health, digital and physical access, scheme design, recognition and ageism moderate the strength of the link between older people and circular participation.

P6. Where contribution is recognised and fairly treated, a reinforcing loop can sustain participation over time; this is a novel conjecture that needs longitudinal evidence.

Table 3. The six propositions, their evidential status and suggested tests.

Proposition	Evidential status	Suggested test and measurement
P1 (cohort competence)	Comparative claim; not yet established	Cross-cohort survey of repair/reuse skills; skills inventories and time-use diaries
P2 (wellbeing via generativity)	Plausible; partly supported; causation unproven	Longitudinal design linking participation, generativity and validated wellbeing scales; mediation analysis
P3 (social connection)	Association likely; causal test needed	Panel study with loneliness and connection scales; participants vs matched non-participants
P4 (structural ageism)	Conditional and contested	Discourse and institutional analysis of commissioning, funding and scheme design; case comparison
P5 (moderators)	Supported in adjacent literatures	Moderation analysis across access, health, design and recognition conditions
P6 (reinforcing loop)	Novel conjecture	Multi-wave longitudinal design testing whether recognition sustains participation; process tracing

Source: Authors own work

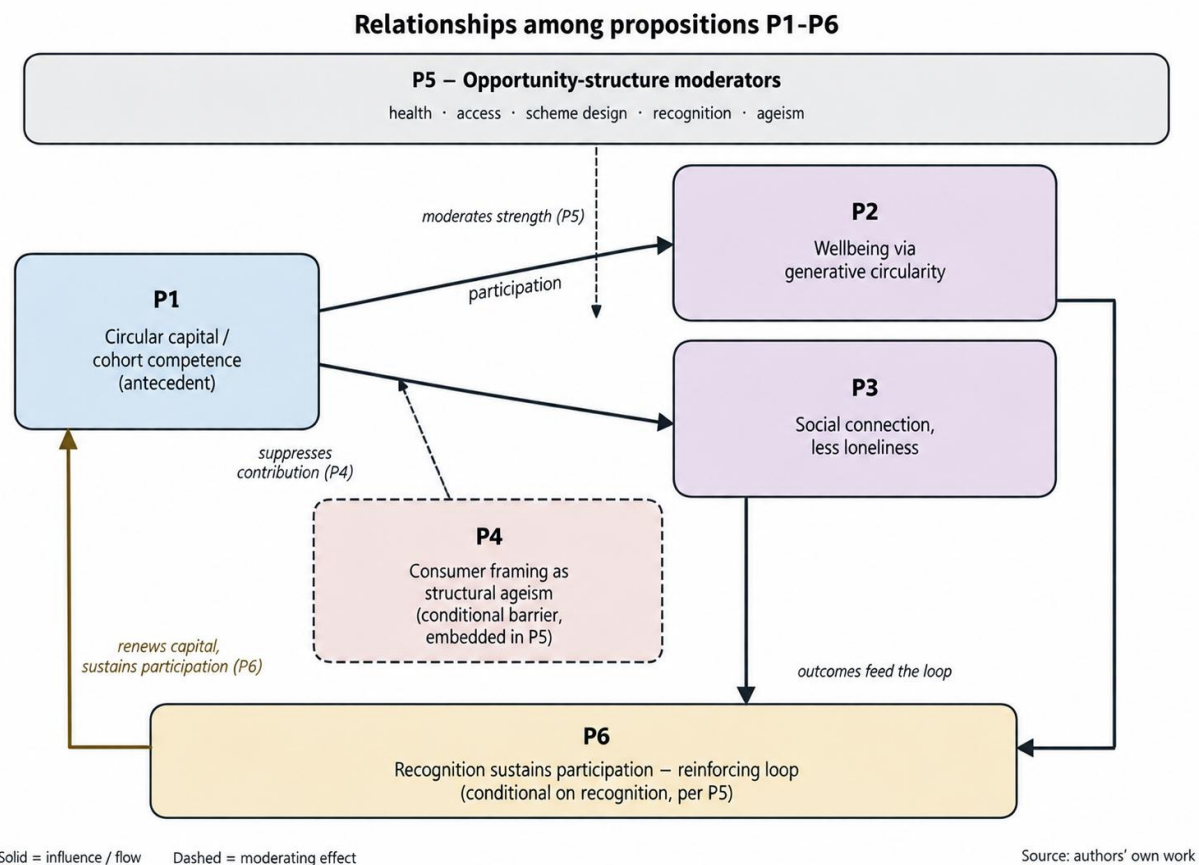


Figure 2. Relationships among propositions P1-P6.

Figure 2 maps how the six propositions connect: circular capital (P1) drives wellbeing (P2) and social connection (P3), P5 moderates these links, P4 suppresses contribution, and P6 loops recognition back to renew participation.

12. Environmental Outcomes and the Limits of the Claim

The model links participation to environmental gain, but that link should not be assumed. Repair, reuse and life extension are not automatically net positive: a repair may involve travel, energy or replacement parts, reuse can keep inefficient products in service, and the aggregate effect depends on participation rates, displacement and rebound. Claims of environmental benefit therefore need measurement, in waste diverted, carbon avoided and material flows changed, and symbolic participation should be distinguished from measurable effect. This is also where the paper's scope must be honest. The circular economy literature spans circular cities, water and sanitation, agriculture, packaging, cooling, ports, photovoltaics, energy storage, mining, bioplastics and automotive systems [32-47]. These fields show

how large and skill dependent circular activity has become, and that is the only inference drawn from them here. They do not show that older people's household competencies transfer to industrial settings, and no such transfer is claimed. Older adults' contribution is located where their competencies actually sit, at household and community scale, and its wider relevance runs through knowledge, service relationships and inclusion rather than through technical substitution [48-50].

13. Implications for Research, Practice, Policy and Society

For research, the agenda is set out in Table 3: measure circular capital through skills inventories, time use and asset mapping; test the wellbeing and inclusion pathways with longitudinal and comparative designs; and study which design features unlock participation for whom. Cross cultural and generational comparison is especially valuable, since the meaning of repair and the standing of older makers vary by setting [7,13,15].

For practice, the reframing is concrete. Services that run repair cafes, tool libraries and reuse hubs can be built around older people's expertise rather than treating them as recipients, and they should be designed with explicit principles: physical and digital accessibility with offline alternatives; recognition and, where appropriate, compensation; safeguarding, insurance and safety; training and progression routes; and evaluation that tracks wellbeing, inclusion and measurable environmental effect. Care and housing settings can weave circular participation into daily life without eroding dignity or person centred care [18,25]. Attention to age friendly, universally designed and well-connected environments decides whether these chances are open to all older people or only to the fittest and best connected [23,24,26]. Local authorities, housing providers and third sector organisations are the natural implementers, and competing aims, cost, throughput and inclusion, have to be managed openly.

The wider social benefits reach past circularity. Shared making and mending can strengthen intergenerational relationships, mutual support and social cohesion, and can feed the informal care and neighborliness on which communities depend. For policy, the argument reframes an ageing population as a sustainability asset as well as a cost, and it aligns demographic and environmental goals that are usually handled apart [3,31,49]. The caution stated in section 3 holds to the end: the aim is to widen how later life is valued, not to hand older people another job.

14. Conclusion

The consumer framing of older people in the silver and circular economies is partial, and a contributor framing restores what it leaves out, provided the contributor is not turned into a second stereotype. By defining circular capital and generative circularity, by treating older people as multi role actors, and by building safeguards and boundary conditions into the model, the paper offers a structured basis for empirical work rather than a slogan. Its claims are conditional and its constructs await measurement. What it asks is modest and, for a field devoted to working with older people, familiar: that later life be recognised as a source of the very competences a circular society needs, and that this recognition be offered on terms older people themselves would choose.

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Data Availability Statement

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Author Contributions

Author contributed to the conceptualisation, drafting and critical revision of the manuscript and approved the final version.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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The author used a generative AI tool to assist with language editing and formatting. All conceptual content, argument, interpretation and final wording are the authors' own, and the authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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