



PSIWORLD 2013

Aging between experience and attitudes: a research with Italian and Spanish

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Abstract

As ageing is one of the most important demographic challenges, it is important to focus our efforts on successful ageing. Positive affect and high self-efficacy levels can be considered important dimensions of successful ageing. We carried out two study involving people from two similar socio-economic contexts in Italy and Spain. The first one was aimed to explore elders' Affect and Self-Efficacy and verify which was the role played by Quality of Life on above mentioned dimensions. The second one verified the supposed hypothesis that empathy and knowledge influenced a better perception of ageing. As concern the first study, elders were somewhat satisfied with their life, Spaniards more than Italians. Almost all of the Quality of Life factors had a role on Positive Affect and Self-Efficacy beliefs. Regarding to the students, our findings showed that both knowledge and empathy played a positive role on a better perception of older people.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Romanian Society of Applied Experimental Psychology.

Keywords: older people; affect, self-efficacy; empathy; knowledge.

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing attention to ageing. On the base of life span perspective, life is viewed as a continuum and ageing as a normal and physiological period of it. Theory as well as research have illustrated that there are improvements and losses at every stage of the life (Baltes, 1987). Because, on one hand, age

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itself is not an explanatory variable that is able to explain a bad ageing (Wohlwill, 1970) and, on the other hand, life expectancy has been increasing, talking about successful ageing is important not only to cope with one of the most important demographic challenges of nowadays, but even to improve older people's well-being. Thus, elderly people's life is not able to be considered only as a waiting season of the death, but rather as an active and significant period of life.

One of the components of well-being is affect. It concerns the extent to which a person feels the own self from a phenomenological point of view (Watson, et. al., 1999; Kaplan, et. al., 2009). Affect is a personal disposition or a trait and thus it remains stable for the time (Thoresen, et. al., 2003). It is composed by two dimensions: a Positive and a Negative one. People with a high Positive Affect level feel active, enthusiastic, tend to look for other people, and be positively engaged with the environment. They are more reactive to positive stimuli, feel more positive emotions and have approach action oriented. People with a high Negative Affect level feel guilty, worried, anxious, tend to have a negative image of themselves and also of their own environment. People with high Negative Affect level are more reactive to negative stimuli, feel more negative emotions and have avoidant behaviours.

As regards ageing, several findings have pointed to how age and positive/negative affect are not always related to each other. Instead, individual peculiarities often play a key role in making the difference on the affect kind. On one hand, negative affect decreases until around the age of 60 and then remains stable (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001); on the other hand, positive affect is stable until the age of 60 years and then declines. Everyday people take actions to influence their affective states. Some of these actions are aimed to improve positive affect and others to decrease negative affect (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004).

Although many physical and sociological changes, which are associated with increasing age, exert negative influences on elders' skills and capacities, the older people can exercise agency (called Self-Efficacy beliefs: Bandura, 1994; Caprara, et al. 2000) on their own emotions and affect. In addition, they shape their environment in ways that fulfil the goals that they value most highly, maximizing positive affect and minimizing negative affect. Yet, psychosocial studies have shown that individual differences in positive affect (Kunzmann, 2008) as well as in Self-Efficacy beliefs (Holahan & Holahan, 1987) are related to different kinds of social behaviours (e.g. contact with friends and relatives, involvement in social organizations and activities): the more is the engagement in the own environment, the more is the own positive affect level.

Positive affect and Self-Efficacy beliefs can be improved by a better perceived Quality of Life (QoL). In other words, it is likely that positive affect and Self-Efficacy are outcomes of the perceived QoL. The QoL has been recognized as a significant issue, especially with regard to old age. According to Bowling (Zahava & Bowling, 2004), it is important to distinguish between micro-individual and macro-societal factors of QoL. The former regard personal experiences, values, well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction; the latter regard the role played by income, employment, housing, education, and other living and environmental conditions.

An important component that may improve, or instead get worse, the older people's QoL regards social stereotypes on ageing (or it would be better saying ageism). Individuals have the social cognitive need to shape events and to confirm their own expectations. In this process, they are driven by beliefs about members of a group and use group-level stereotypes to predict behaviour at the level of the individual group member (Darley & Gross, 1983). The ability to shape the others' behaviour driven by stereotypes may confirm positive and also negative expectations. Findings of a research that had involved a group of students showed that pity was the main emotion directed to the group "elderly people". If, on its surface, pity may look benign, it can work as Pygmalion's effect and produce a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy (Cuddy, Norton & Fiske, 2005). To shed some light on this issue, we could mention the linguistic expression of pity and sympathy, often used by geriatric specialists. These may suggest the idea that elderly needs help and the internalization of these necessities may decrease the own independence (Cohen, 1990). Affective and cognitive factors (empathy and knowledge) may positively influence the others' perception, although the influence of the first one is usually stronger than the second one. Furthermore, both factors can work very well in the contact when the outgroup is not perceived as much threatening (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). It is likely they are good mediators between older and younger people.

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