

ON THE IMPORTANCE TO STUDY OLDER ADULT'S WELL-BEING

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Abstract *Human progress in increasing life expectancy does not appear to be slowing down. This can be understood as an achievement for humanity, but can also pose a challenge to aging populations. Despite the fact that aging is inevitable, it is also an experience to be cherished. Consequently, to address the issue of an increasingly aging population in the future, new strategies are necessary to combat the challenges that individuals may face, given that as they age, individuals are more likely to encounter adversity. In light of this, it is becoming increasingly clear that the assessment of individual well-being should be at the centre of governments' attention, as it underpins healthy and productive aging. The growing trend of aging is putting an increased emphasis on healthy living and maintaining well-being is imperative. Enhancing individuals' well-being makes them more productive for the economy and helps to reduce healthcare costs at the same time. The study and promotion of older adults' well-being therefore has a significant impact, not only on the individual but also on society as a whole.*

Keywords *older adults, ageing, well-being.*

Introduction

In recent decades, older adults have become an increasingly integral part of the global population, given the demographic ageing phenomenon we are facing. This demographic change has far-reaching socio-economic and political implications for people of all ages.

Much of the public discourse about older people is negative, but the fact that old age brings challenges and costs should not be seen as a negative aspect of life. The costs associated with ageing clearly have implications for individuals, governments, communities, families. These include higher health and support costs, which are challenges for governments, and lower tax revenues as this age group retires. None of this should lead to the conclusion that older people should be seen as an economic liability and a social burden.

Although much of the public discourse about older people is negative, the elderly also make valuable contributions to society, both material and non-material, and younger generations benefit from their experience. Increased longevity and the growing presence of older adults create new opportunities for both individual and social development. On the other hand, despite the fact that the life expectancy of the ageing population has increased in recent decades, this does not necessarily imply that the quality of the years spent in the later stages of life has also improved. Thus, social and economic policies, services and research are needed to enhance the well-being of older adults and to eliminate the ageism

that prevents older people from living with dignity, realising their full potential and gaining resources.

Another important point to note is that not all people experience old age in the same way, so despite the fact that ageing is a natural and inevitable phase of life, it can have its own set of outcomes.

Given this context, along with the characteristics and changes associated with ageing, ensuring well-being for older people is a very important challenge that will continue to gain importance both as a global challenge as well as a domestic priority in most countries.

Well-being is an important outcome for individuals, groups and society as a whole. In the context of demographic ageing, it is becoming increasingly important to know what constitutes well-being, how it is formed and how it can be improved or maintained. Knowledge of well-being trajectories can contribute to keeping more and more older adults as active as possible.

Defining well-being

The meaning of a good life is a controversial issue for which there is currently no universally accepted consensus on what well-being means for society and what it means for a person. One of the main reasons why this term is so ambiguous is because there are different ways in which it can be used. Consequently, terms such as quality of life, happiness, prosperity, life satisfaction or health are used interchangeably with well-being, but nevertheless these terms differ in their nuances.

Thus, as a consequence of all these related concepts, it has become difficult to compare studies both across and within disciplines. It is also important to note that the use of different theoretical models and different measures and methodologies creates a very broad and diverse field of well-being.

According to the various theoretical propositions presented in Table 1, the concept of well-being is defined by different components, which highlights that a construct that is not directly observable corresponds to a complex set of phenomena that can be deduced analytically either from the general concept that encompasses them or empirically from their recurrent interrelationships (Lazarsfeld, 1973). We can also see that well-being is increasingly presented as embodying a series of components organised around central human needs.

In terms of the well-being of older adults, this is a significant challenge given the ageing process (Steptoe et al., 2012; Demakakos et al., 2010). It is often understood as the experience of being in good health, of being clinically healthy, but being well is not always about physical health and the absence of disease. Although there is a general consensus that well-being is particularly affected by the ageing process (Barnes et al., 2013), it can be said that a person can experience well-being even following a diagnosis of a chronic illness (Gasper, 2007b; King, 2007; Myers & Diener, 1995). Thus, well-being is not only related to biological health, but also to how people feel about their zest for life, the experience of a meaningful life, referring also to positive moods and emotions, lack of depression and anxiety, life satisfaction (Graham & Shier, 2010). Equating well-being with health may be a consequence of conceptual ambiguity.

Table 1: Definitions of well-being used in the literature

Definition	Reference
„Wellbeing stems from the degree of fit between individuals' perceptions of their objective situations and their needs, aspirations or values.”	Andrews & Withey, 1976
”Subjective well-being research is concerned with individuals’ subjective experience of their own lives. ”	Diener et. al., 1999
”Well-being is a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one’s goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life.”	ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries <i>www.welldev.org.uk</i>
”This is a dynamic state, in which the individuals is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society”.	New Economics Foundation, 2008

**Source: author’s processing*

Similarly, the Older People's Commissioner for Wales sees the well-being of older adults as the 'life' that has value, meaning and purpose when: they feel safe and are listened to, valued and respected; they are able to get the help they need, when they need it, in the way they want it; they live in a place that suits them and their life; they are able to do the things that matter to them.

Thus, well-being is related to more than just older adults' self-assessment and perception, and it is specifically important to also consider people's 'functionalities' and freedoms as measures of well-being beyond what they report and perceive. Ultimately, what really matters is the extent of opportunities and the degree of freedom to choose the life they want. Ultimately, this concept should be understood as a term composed of different aspects and factors, each with relative significance.

The importance of well-being

Understanding and knowing well-being is a real challenge as it requires an understanding of human life and its processes of change and development. As a result of the demographic ageing phenomenon we are facing, significant changes are taking place in the whole population, and it is well known that in the near future the largest segment of the population will be the elderly. Thus, increasing longevity is accompanied by a need for well-being as a vital and critical component to add life to the years.

Well-being is generally perceived as a "good thing" and a "fundamental goal of any society" (Rees et. al., 2009). Thus, both as a matter of public policy as well as a matter of private interest, well-being should be the ultimate goal. It is important to stress that in the current context of rapidly ageing societies, studying well-being as age increases implies a particularly interesting research question not only for policy makers but also for all aspects of society. Therefore, as a society, it is very important that our attention turns to areas that are vital to the well-being of the older population, such as workforce and retirement, social networks, context and neighbourhood, health and material resource disparities, discrimination, long-term care, physical functioning.

According to the well-being paradox, individuals often experience high levels of well-being despite age-related declines (Windle, 2011). Thus, increasing the well-being of the elderly in the face of the adversities they experience is one of significant public health interest and importance as increased longevity undoubtedly leads to a particular demand for health care. Thus, a major challenge is to understand this age group and to counteract the increase in the number of diseases in the elderly, which will lead to a decrease in the tax burden for both the health and pension systems, because as the population ages, higher dependency rates and higher health care costs are generated. What is needed is a society that does not segregate and stigmatise people in poor health, but instead provides them with dignity and quality medical and psychological care leading to a decent standard of living, so that they can consequently lead a dignified and quality life.

Therefore, maintaining good physical health and functioning as a mean of facilitating independent mobility and enabling older adults to engage in more integrated functional roles that include activities of daily living, fulfilling social roles and involvement in recreational activities is becoming increasingly important (7,13).

In addition to the massive presence of degenerative diseases that lead to reduced mobility and increase the risk of dependence on family and society among older adults, well-being is also linked to material circumstances. Concern about having sufficient material resources after retirement can reduce well-being and limit people's options. Fears about future financial security and budget cuts in the health and social care sector can increase the anxiety older people feel in the current economic climate. Hence, there is a need to promote the encouragement of older people to stay longer in the workforce, and at the same time to remove barriers around age limits that prevent people from getting involved and staying involved in meaningful activities to the extent they would like.

Social well-being is at the heart of an older person's social functioning. As people age, their social relationships may diminish as friends or even partners may die, and these changes have negative effects on well-being (Charles and Carstensen, 2010). It is also noted that social networks and social support are factors that make older adults adhere to exercise more often (Smith et al., 2017). Also, according to Mayer and Klumb (2005), participation in social activities among older adults is associated with reduced mortality rates beyond participation in other leisure activities. Moreover, participation in social activities encourages a sense of belonging, with social integration becoming part of the person's inner world, which facilitates positive psychological states that in turn enhance positive physiological outcomes (Cohen, 2004). As such, it is becoming increasingly important for older people to maintain strong social connections and engage in the community.

New Economics Foundation (2012) mentions that a well-being based approach is important as it allows to:

- Go beyond focusing on what can go wrong, and focus on what makes people's lives successful;
- Look at the strengths and assets people bring to situations and communities, rather than only focusing on what they lack;
- Focus not only on economic circumstances, but also on the important areas of emotional and social needs of people.

Having a good understanding of what makes older adults' lives go well, seeing all the positive things that they can do and considering their emotional and social needs, promotes the development of projects and services that better suit the many aspects of their lives.

Conclusion

The ageing process is not something we can reverse, but as part of a life cycle it is something that helps us determine how we perceive our personal well-being at this point in time. Moreover, despite the fact that there has been a loss of autonomy and adaptability in the elderly, and that the possibility of health fragility, abandonment of the workplace, and reduction in family and social roles has gradually increased, these circumstances are not considered to be determinative for all older adults, as this population is heterogeneous.

Therefore, in an era where many countries are facing the challenges of an ageing population, it would be ideal to obtain more information about the well-being of older people and the factors influencing it, so that appropriate policies can be formulated to support a healthy and long life. It is also important to identify areas of high and low well-being for this group to help develop policies and to help provide the necessary services.

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