

EDITORIAL

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Positive aspects in research and intervention with elderly people

*Aspectos positivos en la investigación y intervención con
personas mayores*

Aspectos positivos na pesquisa e intervenção com idosos

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ABSTRACT: Research on positive aspects in old age has become relevant in recent decades. The findings have questioned many negative assumptions and have provided evidence of the multiple available resources and potential of older people. Recent theoretical reformulations, the new concept of development and empirical findings about positive aspects of aging have provided opportunities to generate new practices aimed at promoting well-being in this stage of life. This article analyses, first, the studies on positive aspects in old age that show that at this stage of life there are also gains and development. Secondly, we examine the positive practices, their rationale, purpose and impact. Finally, we propose the challenge of consolidating this line of work and developing new projects aimed at achieving higher levels of well-being, generativity and development in old age.

Keywords: Positive outlook; Development; Research; Intervention.

RESUMEN: *Las investigaciones sobre aspectos positivos en la vejez han tomado gran relevancia en las últimas décadas. Los hallazgos han cuestionado diversos supuestos negativos y han proporcionado evidencia acerca de los múltiples recursos y potencialidades de los que disponen las personas mayores. Las recientes reformulaciones teóricas, la nueva concepción del desarrollo y los hallazgos empíricos acerca de aspectos positivos en la vejez han brindado posibilidades de generar nuevas prácticas orientadas a promover el bienestar en esta etapa de la vida. El presente artículo efectúa, en primer lugar, un análisis acerca de diversas investigaciones sobre aspectos positivos en la vejez que muestran que en esta etapa de la vida también se presentan ganancias y desarrollo y en segundo lugar, se analizan las prácticas positivas, sus fundamentos, propósitos e impacto. Finalmente, se plantea el desafío de consolidar esta línea de trabajo y de generar nuevas propuestas que apunten a lograr mayores niveles de bienestar, generatividad y desarrollo en la vejez.*

Palabras clave: *Perspectiva positiva; Desarrollo; Investigación; Intervención.*

RESUMO: *A pesquisa sobre os aspectos positivos da velhice assumiu grande relevância nas últimas décadas. As descobertas têm questionado várias suposições negativas e forneceram evidências sobre vários recursos e potencialidades das pessoas idosas. As recentes reformulações teóricas, o novo conceito de desenvolvimento, e os resultados empíricos sobre aspectos positivos da velhice têm proporcionado oportunidades para gerar novas práticas destinadas a promover o bem-estar nesta fase da vida. Este artigo realiza, em primeiro lugar, uma análise de várias pesquisas sobre os aspectos positivos da terceira idade, mostrando que, nesta fase, ganhos de vida e desenvolvimento são também apresentados e, em segundo lugar, práticas positivas, quando seus fundamentos são analisados, sua finalidade e impacto. Finalmente, o desafio de consolidar esta linha de trabalho e desenvolver novas propostas destinadas a alcançar níveis mais elevados de bem-estar, generatividade e desenvolvimento surgem na velhice.*

Palavras-chave: *Perspectivas positivas; Desenvolvimento; Pesquisa; Intervenção.*

Introduction

In the last few decades, the interest for the study of the aging process and old age has widely increased. In fact, research on this subject has spread out, making significant contribution both in the theoretical and intervention fields.

The high increase in life expectancy and consequently the constant and progressive rise in the number of elderly people within the total population, require even more research that will expand the knowledge of these new phenomena and give answers to new problems.

Traditionally, only the negative aspects of aging and old age have been studied, and the deficits and pathologies in the elderly led to a negative outlook on this stage in life. However, more recent studies have changed the orientation of the search, including the exploration of the positive aspects in this stage, understanding as such the resources and potential at hand.

The new trend in research shows a change of policy that not only brings out the prejudices that used to introduce the issues, but also proposes the unveiling of a new reality.

This chapter will deal with various research studies that show advances in old age related to the principles of life course theory. Also, the design of various positive interventions aimed at increasing the welfare of the elderly is addressed.

Finally, the importance of both doing research in depth and positive interventions is stressed. This will promote a more positive image of ageing, which will enable older persons to live in an environment that enhances their capabilities and fosters a better quality of life.

Research on positive aspects

In recent decades, research on ageing has provided evidence of great importance for the understanding of this vital stage. Traditionally, the emphasis and prioritization of the study of various negative aspects in old age had contributed in consolidating a negative image of old age.

This orientation of the searches has conditioned our findings, providing evidence solely on the negative aspects and helping to strengthen both scientific and social narratives holding a negative view of this vital stage. We must consider that the stereotypes about older adults fall on, limit and condition their way of being and behaving.

They often take a socially relegated marginal place because they assume that is what is expected from them or because it is considered normal for their age to do so (Iacub, & Arias, 2013).

These situations generate environments that offer little support, that restrict the possibilities and opportunities of senior citizens and contribute to a progressive disempowerment which restricts participation and decision-making on issues that affect them not only as a social group, but also in personal issues involving individual choices.

More recently, new theoretical perspectives arising from positive psychology and Geriatric Psychiatry have increased interest in generating greater awareness about the positive aspects of aging. This perspective does not imply denying the deficits or impairments, but identifying resources and potentialities - from which to start working - even in cases with the highest levels of pathology.

The development of research in this regard allowed us to question many negative stereotypes about old age, to discover aspects that were improved in this stage of life and thus achieve a more balanced picture including both gains and losses. (Freund, & Baltes, 2007; Arias, 2009).

Among other issues, these investigations have shown that senior citizens have higher levels of well-being, happiness and life satisfaction (Carstensen, & Charles, 1998; Lacey, Smith, & Ubel, 2006; Wood, Kisley, & Burrows, 2007; Arias, & Soliverrez, 2009a; 2009b), various strengths (Arias, Castañeiras, & Posada, 2009; Arias, 2009) and compared with younger age groups, have higher levels of wisdom (Baltes, & Baltes, 1990; Ardelt, 2003) and better control of their emotions (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005; Charles, & Carstensen, 2007; Márquez González, Fernández de Trocóniz, Montorio Cerrato, & Losada Baltar, 2008).

Moreover, the assumed social isolation and low participation in old age have also been questioned because recent findings have shown that older people have active social lives (Cornwell, Schumm, Laumann, & Graber, 2009; Fernández Ballesteros, 2009), have functional social support networks and bonds of high intimacy and frequent contact (Arias, 2004; Arias, & Polizzi, 2010, Cornwell, Schumm, Laumann, & Graber, 2009).

In addition, exploring the changes that occur in old age networks, it has been observed that these have great dynamism, even though they often suffer frequent losses.

The elderly actively build new meaningful relationships after turning 60 (Elgart, 2009; Arias, & Polizzi, 2010). This possibility of compensation found in the study of networks has also been found when exploring the sexual activity in old age, among other issues (Arias, & Polizzi, 2013).

These and other results achieved from the exploration of positive aspects in the elderly have shown not only the various resources that older people have, but also the great potential for change, active coping in situations of loss and sorting difficulties.

The former examples have reinforced the concept of development throughout life and co-existence of gains and loss in each of the stages. The findings clearly show the possibilities for change, as opposed to an alleged rigidity during this stage of life, generating new behaviors or strategies to maintain high levels of comfort and satisfaction with the losses.

Life course theory (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998), the selection, optimization and compensation model (Baltes, & Baltes, 1990; Freund, & Baltes, 2007), the socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), readings of aging from the narrative identity point of view (Iacub, 2011), among others, show examples of new concepts which see the process of aging and old age differently, considering the losses, but also the gains from each stage of life, the wide variability existing in old age and the potential that exists in the elderly.

Also, the change about the concept of development has had important effect both with regard to the vision of old age and aging and the possibility of developing new devices that promote learning, growth and the strengthening of various potentials that senior citizens have even in very advanced stages of their lives.

This new theoretical approach and research findings as the above mentioned, show the multiple resources and potential of the elderly and expand the possibilities to design intervention strategies aimed to both treatment and care, and prevention and promotion of health. Beyond the specific objectives of each of them, they will contribute in one way or another to a positive and competent aging process and improve the quality of life of the elderly.

Positive gerontology practices

Following the line described above, various social support practices that are aimed at promoting wellness in people from a positive perspective have been developed. These support practices range from a practical approach in clinical settings (instead of aiming to minimize damage, pathology or suffering, they have focused specifically on enhancing the positive, e.g. working with positive emotions, gratitude, happiness, the ability to forgive, optimism, cognitive reformulations, positive writing, life review etc.) to multiple proposals like workshops, courses, activities etc., from the same perspective, aiming to optimize resources and promote development.

This type of positive interventions has been widely tested and its effectiveness in achieving the objectives has been proven. Sin, and Lyubomirsky, (2009) conducted a meta-analysis based on 51 studies that had assessed the effectiveness of positive interventions on 4266 people from different age groups. The authors found that these interventions improved well-being and reduced depressive symptoms. In addition, they concluded that the benefits of such interventions increased with age, so that senior citizens obtained the best results from them.

Moreover, outside the clinical setting, various public and private organizations have generated a wide range of support systems for the elderly, which are based on working with the positive aspects.

In the last decades, an extensive range of proposals that include courses, workshops, activities, programs for leisure and recreation, personal development or community development have been developed. (Villar, & Solé, 2006; Villar, & Celdrán, 2012). Among them, the psychoeducational workshops and university programs for seniors stand out for their extent and diversity.

In Argentina, the growth of these support systems has been exponential and participation of the elderly has increased steadily. National universities are currently implementing programs for senior citizens and have recently joined PAMI (social security for senior citizens) to organize the UPAMI workshops together with public and private universities in which thousands of older people participate every year.

In both cases the offer of topics is diverse in order to satisfy the interests and motivations of a very heterogeneous group. There are also national programs for volunteering seniors as well as the passing of knowledge to other generations.

This type of positive practices, beyond the specific topic they deal with, all have a common thread. The following are some examples:

- 1) the positive outlook that assumes the presence of resources and strengths in all seniors, even in those that have the highest levels of impairment in one or in several areas;
- 2) the need to deal with the negative stereotypes about old age (in all workshops, the reflection and questioning about the subject is included, as in many cases the elderly reproduce and act according to them, limiting their own possibilities);
- 3) the assessment of the active and enthusiastic participation of the elderly and the achievement of empowerment for healthy aging;
- 4) the importance of promoting welfare, giving priority to the development of potential, strengthening of resources, enhancement of autonomy, self-esteem and self-efficacy as well as strengthening their social supports;
- 5) the possibility of change and learning that the elderly have, according to the conception of development throughout life.

With regard to the evaluation of the implementation of these support systems, the psychoeducational ones have been the most explored. Villar, and Solé (2006) consider that these provide different benefits to senior citizens. They aim to develop new skills and knowledge assessing the previous experience and interactive learning. They also aim to improve overall cognitive functioning, to develop empowerment, to increase autonomy and self-worth. Also, they help to develop bonds with peers and encourage participation in new areas of social relations and integration into currents of social change, without losing sight of individual differences, thereby increasing their welfare and generative possibilities.

In implementing such proposals, a great motivation has been observed in the elderly, who were deeply involved in the different proposals of activities and the achievement of new learning. They have also expressed expectations to continue in future workshops. The working environment has been, in all cases, pleasant and cooperative. They have shown great openness to share in group-work, both their ideas and thoughts on the topic worked on, as well as accounts of events in their own lives (Dottori, & Arias, 2013).

Undoubtedly, the task of designing intervention strategies and techniques that aim to enhance the capabilities, resources and potential of individuals, groups and communities is one of the challenges ahead of Psychology (Vera Poseck, 2006). According to Vecina Jimenez (2006), exploring the possibilities of strategies from the positive outlook is something intriguing for research and probably useful to improve the effectiveness of treatments.

Work focused on prevention and encouraging the development or strengthening of skills, implementation of strategies that promote skills, optimize and release potential (Fernandez Ballesteros, 2009), as well as the proposal of interesting and meaningful activities that encourage learning are but a few lines of research to develop, in the short term, in the work with older people.

Conclusions

In recent decades, research on the positive aspects of aging has provided important findings about this vital stage. The study of resources, strengths, skills and competencies has resulted in a greater understanding of the variability and complexity of human aging and in turn, it has stressed the need to go deeper into the subject. Several studies have shown that senior citizens can be happy, have sufficient social support, enjoy their sexuality, have high-level of wellness, be satisfied with their lives and have multiple personal strengths, among other positive aspects. One of the major contributions of these findings has been the questioning – repeated and grounded - of a wide variety of false negative stereotypes about this vital stage.

The production of narratives about old age and aging, with the inclusion of both negative as well as positive aspects and the analysis of its dialectical relationship (Ryff, & Singer, 2007), should avoid simplifications and partitions of knowledge and enrich our awareness about this stage of life (Arias, 2008). This is of great importance towards the empowerment of older adults (Iacub, & Arias, 2010). However, it is necessary that they be spread both in academia and in the community in general.

With regard to positive practices, providing the elderly with activities like this gives them more opportunities for participation, integration and full development of their potential.

With the increase of this type of gerontological practices not only will the social environment be more encouraging, but also the changes that will occur at the group and subjective level will help develop new personal resources, it will favor decisions and choices less influenced and limited by the weight of negative stereotypes and it will also help to the empowerment of the elderly (Iacub, & Arias, 2010).

We can conclude that gerontological research and practices developed in a positive perspective are important tools for achieving higher levels of well-being, generativity and development in old age.

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