

Reflective intelligence and argument as construction tools psychological well- being

*La inteligencia reflexiva y la argumentación como
herramientas de construcción del bienestar psicológico*

*Inteligência reflexiva e argumentação como ferramentas
de construção do bem-estar psicológico*

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to report the positive effects that the workshop "Reflective intelligence: the art of argumentation" has on UPAMI¹ participants. This workshop is a tool for participants to reflect on their own thoughts, generating argumentation process and group discussion. We base our practice on the argumentation theories, rhetoric laws, critical thinking basis, communication and assertiveness in the art of oratory. We conducted a survey to research the impact this workshop has on the subjectivity of its participants and their daily relationships. Based on the survey's results we analyze the psychological well-being dimensions. Among the most frequent virtues mentioned are courage, wisdom, knowledge and temperance. Taking the latter into account, participants have practiced perseverance, open-mindedness and self-regulation. Likewise, they have raised their levels of empowerment, their capacity for reflection and self-efficacy in terms of argumentation techniques, generating psychological well-being.

Keywords: Reflective intelligence; Argumentation; Psychological well-being.

¹ UPAMI (Universidad para Adultos Mayores Integrados) University Integrated Program for Older Adults.

RESUMEN: *El objetivo del presente trabajo es dar cuenta de los efectos positivos que produce, en los adultos mayores participantes de UPAMI, asistir al taller “Inteligencia reflexiva: el arte de argumentar”. Este dispositivo es un facilitador para que los participantes reflexionen sobre sus propios pensamientos, generando procesos de argumentación y debates grupales. Sustentamos nuestra práctica en las teorías de la argumentación, las leyes de la retórica, las bases del pensamiento crítico, la asertividad en la comunicación y el arte de la oratoria. A fin de indagar en el impacto que ha tenido el taller en la subjetividad de sus participantes y en sus relaciones cotidianas hemos realizado una encuesta final; es en base a los resultados de la misma que profundizamos sobre dimensiones del bienestar psicológico. Entre las virtudes más recurrentes en sus respuestas encontramos el Coraje, la Sabiduría, el Conocimiento y la Templanza; a partir de ellas se han practicado la perseverancia, la apertura mental y la autorregulación. Asimismo, han elevado sus niveles de empoderamiento, su capacidad de reflexión y autoeficacia en cuanto a técnicas argumentativas, generando todo ello un aumento en su bienestar psicológico.*

Palabras clave: *Inteligencia reflexiva; Argumentación; Bienestar psicológico.*

RESUMO: *O objetivo deste artigo é explicar os efeitos positivos que ocorrem em participantes adultos mais velhos ligados ao UPAMI, ao participarem da oficina "Inteligência reflexiva: A arte de argumentar". Este dispositivo é um facilitador para os participantes refletirem sobre seus próprios pensamentos, gerando processos de argumentação e discussões em grupo. Baseamos nossa prática nas teorias da argumentação, nas leis retóricas, nos fundamentos do pensamento crítico, na assertividade da comunicação e no falar em público. Para investigar o impacto que teve a oficina na subjetividade de seus participantes, e em suas relações diárias, foi realizada uma pesquisa final. Ela baseia-se nos resultados da mesma à medida que aprofundou dimensões de bem-estar psicológico. Entre as respostas mais frequentes são: virtudes na coragem, sabedoria, conhecimento e temperança; a partir daí, ter sido praticada a perseverança, a abertura de espírito e a auto-regulação. Os participantes levantaram seus níveis de capacitação, sua capacidade de reflexão e auto-eficácia sobre técnicas argumentativas, acarretando-lhes o aumento de seu bem-estar psicológico.*

Palavras-chave: *Reflective Inteligência; Argumentação; Bem-estar psicológico.*

Introduction

From 2013 to date, a positive gerontological practice is developed at the School of Psychology at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), under the UPAMI programs. This workshop – which we are a part of - arises from older people theoretical background developed by Dr. Ricardo Iacub, Psychology Professor on Old Age and Aging (School of Psychology, UBA).

Our main interest is oriented to reflect on the role of the workshop "reflexive intelligence: the art of argumentation" as a tool, for participants, in the construction of psychological well-being.

In this matter, we understand psychological well-being as "the development of skills and personal growth, where the individual indicators show positive performance" (Diaz *et al.*, 2006, in Rodriguez, and Quinones Berrios, 2012).

Our aim is to show how this psycho-educational program affects human strengths - recognized and classified by Peterson and Seligman through their research (Hervas, 2009) - either recognizing, exercising or strengthening them.

First, we will make a description of the workshop, in terms of the population it is aimed at, the contents developed, methodology and theoretical framework, articulating this with the participants' final survey answers.

Taking into account the contributions of Positive Psychology, we will refer to the virtues exercised by the participants, which enable them to recognize their strengths and their cognitive resources, generating in them higher levels of psychological well-being.

About the workshop

The "Reflexive intelligence: the art of argumentation" program is one of the workshops led by Ricardo Iacub at the School of Psychology of Aging and Old Age, implemented through a collaboration agreement between the University Extension, Culture and Well-being Department of the School of Psychology and the National Institute of Social Services for Pensioners (INSSJP - PAMI), through its University Integrated Program for Older Adults (UPAMI).

The experience began in 2013 with a theoretical approach focusing on critical thinking and reflexive intelligence. Then, during the first quarter of 2015, the third pillar, the theory of argumentation, gave it its current name, "Reflexive intelligence: the art of argumentation" workshop.

Two workshops have been conducted on different days, on a weekly basis, with approximately 20 people participating per group, mostly women; their ages range between 59 and 79 years old.

The main goal is to facilitate self-reflection, leading to group argumentation process and guided debate. As for the topics addressed, we highlight the theories of argumentation, rhetoric laws, critical thinking basis, communication and assertiveness in the art of oratory.

The work methodology is planned for each meeting. There is an explanatory section for theoretical topics and another practical one with different exercises, among which we may mention problematic situations dynamics and role-playing. At the same time, resources such as vignettes, advertisements, news stories and sayings are used.

The activities are designed to favor a gradual exercise in relation to the topics complexity and debate starters, going from non-emotional topics to other more emotional ones. In the first meetings, argumentation concepts and basic knowledge are introduced; then self-knowledge activities, group discussions, using the argumentation and counter argumentation. Once participants learn the argumentation technique we generate different types of debates, including alternation of roles to promote flexibility in thinking.

We use an initial survey to learn about participants' prior knowledge on the topics and their expectations for the workshop. A final survey is conducted to investigate the impact the program has in participants' subjectivity and in their everyday relationships.

Workshop's theoretical rationale

Throughout this chapter, we will go through the theoretical rationale that supports the workshop, relating to its effects on participants, expressed in the responses of the survey conducted at the end of the four-month term.

The term "reflexive intelligence" refers to the ability to reflect and analyze a situation from multiple perspectives. With reflexive intelligence not only does the individual put into practice cognitive abilities such as attention, reasoning, deduction, logic, memory, intelligence in general, but also, crystallized intelligence, which appears in a privileged way in the elderly.

By using this type of intelligence different mechanisms such as empathy, anxiety management and loss of control tolerance are triggered. At the same time, it gives the individual the possibility to criticize the hegemonic discourses, common sense, prejudice, stereotypes and to review the reductionism of certain arguments.

The notion of reflexivity from which we plan our workshop is the one developed by Maria Auxiliadora Chacon Corzo:

Reflection implies an act of thinking that allows us to abstract ourselves to be able to observe, to discuss with oneself and to try to explain one's actions. It means to critically observe what one is doing, to justify each of the decisions taken and to further self-question to rectify or make decisions in order to improve. (Chacón, 2006, p. 51).

Accordingly, we will give evidence on how the workshop participants incorporated reflexive thinking:

"Thinking before giving an opinion, reflecting and listening to others. Also, in some cases, to reaffirm my convictions. Fundamentally, it means finding arguments that can be convincing. Listening to other people's arguments, without rushing with the answers. Thanks to the workshop, I am able to listen to the other -such as in a family discussion -, pay attention to the other's thoughts and reflect about it and also to be careful not to answer without thinking first." (Carmen, 69 years old)

"Before giving my opinion, now I think and reflect. Previously I used to be very quick in my answers and now not so much. I concluded that, as there is more than one way of thinking, I could have other ideas. I learned to listen to others without interrupting; I realized that what I used to do to everyone was very rude." (Elena, 79 years old)

By focusing on the argument, we start with a different approach in the discursive techniques to obtain or increase the adhesion of an audience to the proposed thesis for its assent.

Giving an argument means providing a set of reasons or evidence to support a conclusion. Taking the classic paradigm of organization of the disciplines, argumentation is linked to logic: "*the art of thinking correctly*"; as well as to rhetoric: "*the art of speaking well*"; and also to dialectic: "*the fine art of having a conversation*". This organization represents the way in which the argumentation has been developed from Aristotle to the late nineteenth century (Ch. Plantin, 2012).

In the current approaches, we find authors as Perelman, in his *Treaty of Argumentation*, who attempts to show how in different environments the same argumentation techniques appear, both in the family environment as well as in the media (Plantin, 2012). Hence, the importance of managing the argumentation technique is not only to gain expertise in the art of holding a debate but also for decoding the message given by the media.

These argumentation tools are incorporated, critically reviewed and evaluated by the participants:

"The workshop was enriching because it gave me different tools to defend a position." (Maria Ines, 68 years old)

"It gave us new and varied tools." (Susana, 68 years old)

"It helped me to coherently structure latent ideas in order to include them in the discourse." (Carlos, 74 years old)

"The benefits were many, especially, the exchange of ideas and different arguments of the topics discussed." (Edith, 74 years old)

"Indeed, I believe it has been beneficial to be able to criticize what I read or listen to, though I do not express it aloud." (Perla, 79 years old)

"It awakened in me the interest in political analysis and especially in this election year, to analyze the different press, radio or TV opinions." (Violeta, 68 years old)

"Even though there has been no discussion on politics or religion issues, I think the workshop helped me reflect on them more. I always thought that the Popes were political figures. I was not interested for example in John Paul II, however, I am now more into Pope Francis encyclicals and speeches." (Ana Maria, 79 years old)

Accordingly, one of the current approaches within the theories of argumentation is the pragma-dialectical perspective, where the notion of critical discussion and the exchange of perspectives are central. The pragmatic orientation refers to having in mind that arguments are deployed within a specific historical-cultural context. This theoretical line believes that the goal of argumentative language is aimed at regulating disagreement (van Eemeren, and Grootendorst, 2011).

For that matter, although the aim of the workshop is strengthening the argumentation technique in the sophist style, where what matters is the credibility of the construction of the argument, regardless of whether it is true or not, the main goal is for participants to acquire sufficient confidence, so they can apply this strength to their everyday conversations and debates. In this regard, participants noted the productivity of the techniques used:

"By observing the techniques, an enriching complement to the experience was added." (Ernesto, 74 years old)

"A friend of mine did not agree with something personal, and I decided it to give her some arguments; she agrees now." (Sofia, 69 years old)

When exercising the argumentation technique, participants seek to achieve acceptance of the argument built by their peers. Although, most of the time, the exercise facilitates the questioning of the argument and the activation of the argumentative circuit to build more compelling reformulations (Plantin, 2012). Thus, participants advance in the acquisition of a technical skill from which we hope they arrive at what we called "argumentative fencing", acquiring fluency and expertise in the art of debate:

"It (the workshop) taught me to debate in a different way." (Sara, 71 years old)

"The workshop generated an environment for fruitful debate. It enables us to know different ways of approaching the same subject. I incorporated the need to substantiate what is said and, most importantly, the need to listen more to the other with a more open mind, allowing for better debate. We found that the possibility of addressing issues from different perspectives is very enriching. The workshop was very effective in teaching us how to be tolerant of ideas which I may disagree with." (Santiago, 69 years old)

As the workshop advances, participants find themselves feeling more confident in the exercises. There are frequent comments about how they are able to transfer the communication learning exercise outside the workshop. This is related to Bandura's self-efficacy research (1997), self-reflection, which includes the belief that individuals have on their ability to act. Reliance on self-efficacy is a central feature of human potential, contributing directly in decision-making and influencing on other cognitive and emotional aspects (Caprara, and Cervone, 2007).

"The workshop makes me think twice now; before I would "jump to answer" right away. Now, first I think. I have learned to analyze, to reason and manage the emotional side and also handle criticism. I feel calmer, because I think before speaking or acting. I look for arguments calmly." (Claudia, 59 years old)

"My critical thinking is broader and more acute. This gives me greater open-mindedness on internal and external communication." (Alexander, 68 years old)

At the same time, it is possible to link the activities carried out in the workshop with participants' self-esteem, especially when applying the techniques worked on to everyday contexts:

"Many studies have documented that the most reliable way to encourage self-esteem is through successful and immediate experiences." (Bandura, 1997). "The personal experience of dexterity is hard to deny, even for individuals who tend to doubt their performance capabilities." (Caprara, and Cervone, 2007, p. 102).

The survey among the participants showed the immediate success in familiar contexts:

"My children are already seeing the results of my taking this workshop, last week I was talking to the oldest one and I started to defend my position arguing vehemently, he was dumbstruck. He said: It shows you are coming from the workshop!" (Teresa, 71 years old)

We can also observe the effects of the workshop on empowering participants, as "a process of reconstruction of identity, implying the attribution of power, a sense of greater capacity and competence to promote changes in personal and social aspects in each subject." (Iacub, 2012, p. 74)

"This workshop gave me the opportunity to learn how to argue, not to be silent and to make myself heard." (Marta, 68 years old)

"Nowadays, before making a decision, I open my mind and I look for empowerment to give an opinion that represents me." (Emilio, 68 years old)

"The workshop taught me about empowerment, this little word made me feel that I can say in front of my children, who are professionals, that my word is worth too." (Mercedes, aged 64)

"They helped me in the sense of asserting my rights, feeling no longer relegated in a conversation for being an old woman." (Maria, aged 64)

Through practice, we aim to encourage flexible self-regulation that allows for a change of position in the same situation and be able to take the opposite point of view; by doing this, specific skills that enrich human potential are exercised. This occurs from the careful construction of an environment which favors trial and error, where the practice of argumentative techniques can be developed in a playful way, from varied exercises where what matters is to dare to role-play and to change views and perspectives.

"The workshop met my expectations, especially because I have learnt tools with which to improve our communication with others." (Javier, 68 years old)

"The benefits were many, especially the exchange of ideas and different arguments for the topics dealt." (Joseph, 68 years old)

"Arguing from different positions, knowing different opinions to reason, criticize or accept them, all is valid." (Miriam, 73 years old)

"In disagreement one tried to ignore the opposing arguments; when applying reflexive intelligence, using our reasoning in the analysis of a different argument, we can interpret aspects that we can improve or that can make us change our discourse." (Jaime, 74 years old)

The tools acquired in this workshop encourage participants to get involved in different discussions with people of their generation or intergenerational talks; they enrich the skills and competencies that make the individual a skilled "navigator" in a world of constant change (Baltes, and Freund, 2007).

The workshop as a tool to build psychological well-being

Following this line of thought, we consider important to stop and reflect on how this workshop affects psychological well-being through the reinforcement of the participants' strengths. Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman, based on several studies, have classified 6 virtues and 24 human strengths; these are the result of inquiring about valuable aspects of human beings in different cultures.

The highest conceptual level of character abstraction is held by the following virtues: courage, justice, humanity, wisdom and knowledge, restraint and transcendence (Cosentino A.C., 2010). In relation to the workshop "Reflexive Intelligence: the art of argumentation" we can specify how through participation, the elderly reinforce some of these strengths, which are the ways in which the virtues are manifested.

In the virtue of "Courage," we can see how "Perseverance" is exercised, meaning the voluntary continuation of active behavior directed towards a goal, to finish what one started despite the obstacles, difficulties or discouragements, and feeling pleasure in the finished task. (Cosentino, 2010):

"Before I could hardly hold a conversation, I gave up the discussion quickly and ended up by admitting that the person was right to end up the conversation. Now I feel more confident and give myself the time to find the words and express what I feel and think. Sometimes I do not recognize myself, but I'm the same as before." (Maria Marta, 63 years old)

As for "Wisdom" and "Knowledge", we can see how participants enhance their "open mindedness," meaning to actively seek facts or arguments against beliefs, plans or one's own goals and when finding them, to fairly and objectively consider them to change one's perspective as a result of this assessment (Cosentino, 2010).

"Participating in the workshop allowed me to be more tolerant with other people's pace, since I'm rather impulsive. One often takes a stand and by listening to others we expand our own view." (Rosa, 72 years old)

In relation to "Restraint," participants exercise the "self-regulation" strength, which refers to the regulation, control or management of one's own responses; for example, actions, expressions, impulses, desires, thoughts or emotions against internal and external stimuli, in order to adapt certain patterns or meet certain objectives (Cosentino, 2010).

"I feel less impulsive and enjoy a conversation more, either with my family or friends." (Olga, 79 years old)

"I am more observant of the person who speaks to me, looking for other details like posture, gestures, looks or any other detail that helps me to give a better response. I think I give myself more time to answer and state my arguments. I try to be more relaxed, explain better and add humor to decompress the situation." (Fernando, 69 years old)

"I'm more tolerant and I am more open-minded. It allowed me to control my impulses and to listen better. Now, if I have to give an opinion on a topic, I do not keep it to myself. Clearly, the workshop opens new ways of thinking a situation. Teamwork facilitates open-mindedness." (Alicia, 63 years old)

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed the implementation of the "Reflexive Intelligence: the art of argumentation," a workshop developed by UPAMI university program. Thereby, a psycho-educational program that provides conceptual tools and communication skills to promote self-reflection, leading to group argumentation process and guided debate, is offered.

In the participants' final survey, we can observe positive data in higher levels of empowerment, self-efficacy and argumentative techniques that are used in familiar and social environments; as well as in an increase in the ability to critically reflect on everyday issues. Participants gain security and tools to express and defend their ideas, and at the same time, they get training in different skills that enrich communication with others.

From the Positive Psychology perspective, we consider this gerontological practice as a facilitator of seniors' psychological well-being. The aforementioned virtues they highlight are Courage, Wisdom, Knowledge and Restraint. Through the first of them, they have learnt to be "perseverant" in the task, with the second one they have enhanced "open-mindedness", and finally, through the third one, they exercised "self-regulation" which was definitely for most, a challenge to overcome during the meetings.

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Recibido el 17/12/2015

Aceptado el 30/12/2015

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