

Aging and Well-Being

Views, Experiences and Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The growing aging of the population has brought to the fore the problem of how to age with greater quality of life and well-being. The goal of this work is to review and reflect on the research that we have been developing to improve our understanding about the factors associated with well-being and quality of life in aging. First, a set of studies aimed to understand the point of view of the elderly about specific contexts of their lives. Some studies focused the rights that the elderly perceive to have in the residential structures where they live. Other studies, with elderly people who live in their own home, intended to enlighten the role of spirituality/religiosity or the perceived contribution to well-being of attending a senior university. A second set of studies provided some contributions to understand how youth describe the positive functioning of middle-aged and elderly people, or how the perception of affection received from grandparents is associated with the well-being of youth. Questions for future research are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

Elderly, lifelong learning, quality of life, spirituality, positive functioning

Aging and Well-Being: Views, Experiences and Contexts

The growing aging of the population has brought to the fore the problem of how to age with greater quality of life and well-being. In Portugal, life expectancy has increased and is among the highest in Europe (Figure 1), but the remaining years of healthy life after 65 has not followed this growth: in fact, the number of years of healthy life after 65 has decreased for Portuguese women (Figure 2; PORDATA, n.d.). With this in mind, we have been developing a set of studies to examine how Portuguese elderly perceive and experience their lives, focusing some specific contexts they live in, and looking for possible modifiable risk and protective factors.

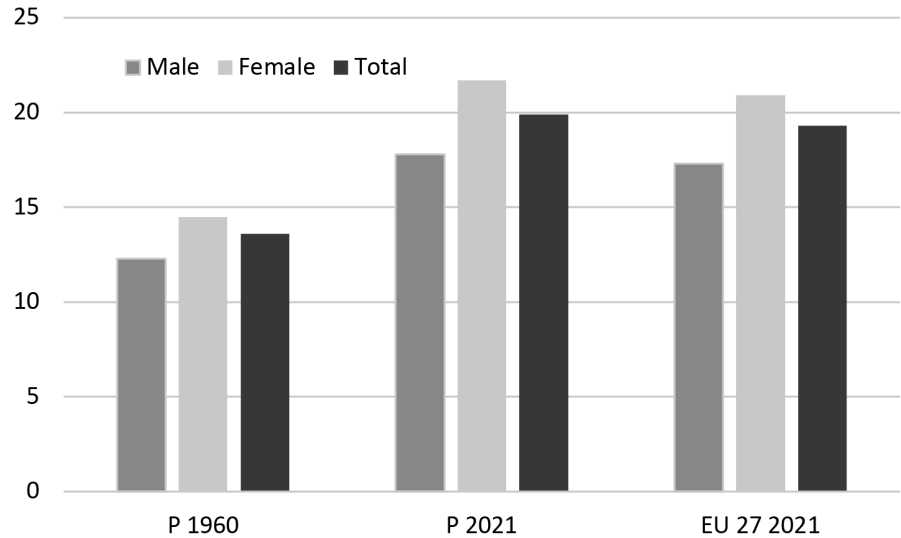
Quality of Life and Well-Being: The Voice of the Elderly

We have been interested in the point of view of the elderly about their lives. Therefore, quality of life (QoL) and well-being (WB) models have provided a theoretical background for much of our work to date. In the same vein, qualitative studies have been preferred; this option allowed us to get data about the perspectives of illiterate persons, a very common condition among Portuguese seniors.

According to the World Health Organization (The WHOQOL Group, 1998), QoL refers to the individuals' perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the persons' physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment (p. 1570).

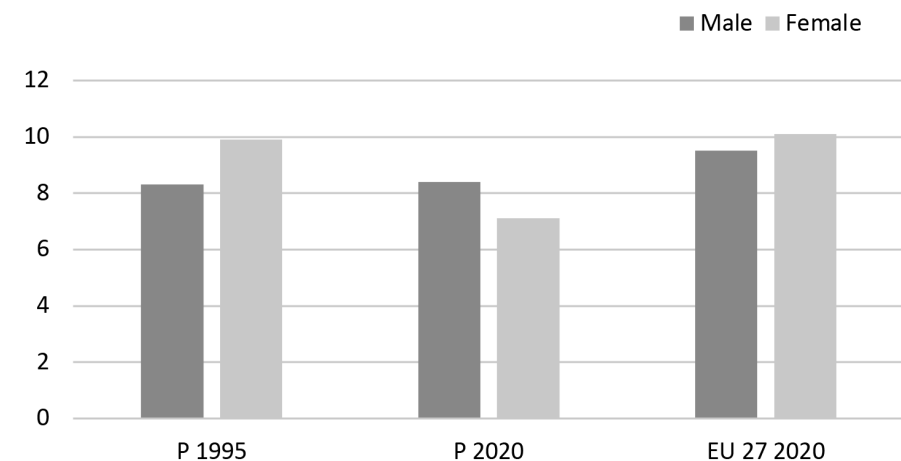
Despite the diversity of QoL models, it is widely accepted that it comprises multiple dimensions in people's lives and encompasses both subjective (the individual's point of view) and objective (proxy's, professionals, etc. points of view) aspects. Schalock and Verdugo (2003)'s model, an influential model in the field (Vanleerberghe et al., 2017),

Figure 1
 Years of life expectancy at 65



Note
 P – Portugal
 EU 27 – European Union (27 countries)

Figure 2
 Remaining years of healthy life at 65



Note
 P – Portugal
 EU 27 – European Union (27 countries)

propose that QoL comprises eight dimensions: personal development, self-determination, interpersonal relationships, social inclusion, rights, emotional well-being, physical well-being and material well-being. These dimensions are universal but their importance for individuals' global QoL can vary according to sociocultural and developmental factors. However, systematic research to enlighten which dimensions are more relevant for seniors is scarce (e.g., Vanleerberghe et al., 2017). Beyond QoL, diverse well-being models have been considered to understand older people's experiences. First, the concept of subjective well-being (SWB) (Diener, 2000), which values individual's hedonic point of view and comprises the dimensions of satisfaction with life (overall or in relation to different dimensions of life) and positive and negative affectivity. Satisfaction with life and negative affect are relatively stable across the lifespan but positive affect seems to diminish (Jebb et al., 2020).

Second, the psychological well-being (PWB) model, which refers to the intrapersonal experience of well-being of the person towards him/herself, comprising dimensions such as self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, mastery of the environment, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 2014). Finally, the social well-being (SoWB) model, which is interested in the person's functioning and adaptation in the context of society, considering social integration, social contribution, social actualization, social coherence, and social acceptance (Keyes, 1998). PWB and SoWB are two distinct but related concepts; Keyes et al. (2002) found that optimal well-being (high values in both subjective and psychological well-being) increases with age and adults with higher psychological than subjective well-being tend to be younger. Young and middle-aged adults show higher levels of purpose in life and personal growth than the elderly, but not in the other dimensions of BEP (Ryff, 2014).

Our research was thus engaged with understanding how Portuguese elderly perceive and experience their lives, focusing on some specific contexts they live in, and looking for possible modifiable risk and protective factors. Theoretically, QoL and well-being models were a reference; methodologically, qualitative studies have been privileged so far.

Research on the Elderly's Point of View

A set of our studies aimed to understand the point of view of the elderly about specific contexts of their lives, such as the rights they perceived they have when living in a nursing home, the role of spirituality/religiosity in widowed elderly who live in their own home, or the perceived contributions to well-being of attending a senior university.

How do older people perceive and experience their rights in nursing homes? Twenty widowed individuals, aged 80 to 91 years-old, some with no literacy skills, were interviewed in a qualitative (content analysis) and quantitative study (Grácio & Bugalho, 2018, 2019, 2020). Some elderly exhibit the idea that they should have certain rights, above all the right to be well cared. But power to own decision-making is seen as non-existent, thus undermining the sense of agency. Most elderly considered that they can complain, although many say they do not do it because of fear retaliations. The little freedom they have is conditioned by the nursing home rules and its professionals. The limitation of the rights of the elderly in an institutional context in which everything is dependent on the power and will of the agents who work there, is a risk factor for the maintenance of identity, development and self-realization of the elderly. The implementation of formal evaluation and monitoring processes, external and internal, which include representatives of the elderly and use participatory and confidential methodologies, could positively contribute to fill some of the existing gaps.

Intimate experiences such as those related to religiosity and spirituality were also of interest to us. Formerly, religiosity and spirituality have been considered as having deleterious effect on individuals' mental health, autonomy, and full personal realization (e.g., Freud, 2001). However, more recent psychosocial approaches become interested in its adaptive potential or religious coping (e.g., Koenig et al., 2012). Conceived differently from religion, religiosity is understood as a practice, which can be institutional (or not), through participation in ceremonies (or not), but mainly as an intrinsic experience of each individual; on the other hand, spirituality was conceived as a personal search for answers about the meaning of life and the relationship with the sacred/transcendent (Koenig et al., 2012). We aimed to understand the role of religiosity/spirituality for elderly's QoL and well-being, from their own standpoint (Grácio et al., to be published). Semi-structured interviews to 20 widowed elderly (71 to 92 years old), living in their own homes in a small town in South Portugal, made evident that elderly believe that spirituality/religiosity improves their own satisfaction with life. They described their religious practices, such as praying, have faith, talk with and pour their heart out to God, ask for protection or going to mass, and respective beneficial outcomes, such as safe haven, unconditional support, acceptance of life or companionship. In particular, spirit-

uality/religiosity emerged as a strategy to cope with preoccupations and covid-19 pandemic, and a source of support when social support lacks.

A specific, recent context in older people lives are the senior universities that emerged in Portugal in the last decades. Grácio and colleagues (2022) aimed to understand to what extent attending a senior university is perceived by the elderly as contributing to their own QoL and well-being. During the pandemic period, 50 users (60-90 years old) of the Senior University of Évora, Portugal, responded to a written questionnaire. The content analyzes suggested that attending the Senior University had a positive impact on all aspects of QoL and well-being explored. The main gains and aspects of greater satisfaction are related to learning, social integration, interpersonal relationships, building friendships and conviviality.

Youths' Point of View on Aging and the Elderly

A second set of our studies focuses on the point of view of youth about ageing and the elderly, namely on how youth describe the positive functioning of middle-aged and elderly people and how the perception of affection received from grandparents is associated with youth's well-being.

In a study we aimed to explore the criteria that youth use to describe the positive functioning of middle aged and elderly adults (Carapeto et al., 2021). Is it consistent with theoretical models of well-being and quality of life? A written questionnaire was administered to 28 college students (mostly female, 18–25 years old). They were asked to identify descriptors of 4 middle aged and elderly acquaintances (both genders) that live well their present life stage and the answers were content analyzed. They provided 434 descriptors of 55 middle aged persons (47.65 years in average) and 52 elderly (76.38 years in averaged). Findings revealed that the criteria used by youth is consistent with theoretically proposed developmental tasks and dimensions of subjective and psychological well-being (no mention of social well-being contents). Positive relations with others followed by purpose in life were the most frequently mentioned for both middle aged and elderly. Positive functioning, in the elderly, was more related to the exhibition of physical health and positive affect, and in the middle aged was more related to job and professional career issues. A new question emerged for future research: Maybe young people is less sensitive to inner signs of positive functioning in middle aged and elderly people (less mentioned), which are out of the scope of their own experience as young people.

The emerging interest in intergenerational issues explores more frequently the beneficial effects of the interaction between younger and older people for the older people well-being. On the contrary, the goal of a quantitative study from our team (Lança, 2021; Pires & Lança, to be published) was to understand the relationship between college students' psychological well-being and their own perception of the affection received from grandparents. The findings (from 240 Portuguese college students, 18 to 25 years old) suggested that college students' psychological well-being was related to love and esteem, affection, and memories and humor, received from grandparents – but not to the commemorative dimension. Mansson, Floyd e Soliz (2017) concluded that the commemorative dimension

contributed the least to the affects that young adults received from their grandparents. Together with other research, it seems reasonable to stand that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is beneficial for the well-being of both.

Conclusions

The reviewed research revealed different life contexts and experiences that seem to have a potential to improve elderly's QoL and well-being, such as the participation in a senior university or religiosity/spirituality experiences. Also highlights the work that needs to be done in terms of implementing the rights of the elderly living in nursing homes. Elderly's QoL and well-being is less a reality than would be possible or desirable, e.g., rights are not fully fulfilled.

Conversely, it was suggested that the interaction with grandparents has the potential to contribute to youth well-being and that youth believes about old people's positive functioning attends more to elderlies' superficial than to their internal experiences.

Further research is needed to deepen knowledge about elderly's views, experiences and contexts, that favor their QoL, well-being and inclusion. Ongoing studies carry further into positive psychology and Baltes' selection-optimization-compensation (Baltes et al., 2006) approaches, for instance to characterize the daily experiences, events and activities (external) and memories and thoughts (inner events), both pleasant and unpleasant, of elderlies living in a nursing home, or understand older adults' views on the gains and losses associated with their own aging processes and how they cope with losses.

Author contributions

LG, MJC and HP: conceptualization, methodology, and project administration, formal analysis and writing – review and editing. MJC and LG: writing – original draft. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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