

Active Ageing: A Comparative Approach

Extended abstract

Ageing population and staying active

European population is ageing, with the share of people aged 65+ expected to undergo a momentous increase, and the relationship between the elderly and other segments of society is going through significant scrutiny. Within the debate, there is relative consensus on the importance of active ageing for the elderly and the society as a whole, where active ageing is defined as ‘continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force’ (WHO, 2002, p.12). This conception pulls together strands of research around physical health in old age and social engagement.

While active ageing has the merit that it goes beyond the notion of healthy ageing, it faces criticism on several accounts, related for instance to the definition of active/passive engagement (Boudiny and Mortelmans, 2011) and to a lack of proper treatment of cultural differences (Ranzijn, 2010). This criticism partly stems from the way in which active ageing is measured and point to questions such as: what activities should be assumed by the term ‘active’? How are they related to each other? Does being engaged in some activities exclude others (are the activities ‘competitive’?) (Lubben and Gironda 2003) or does being active in one domain imply activity in other domains as well (complementary activities) (Hank and Stuck 2008)?

Aim of the study

There have been several attempts to measure active ageing, which could be classified as belonging to a sectorial approach (e.g., Arpino and Bordone (2018) examine how volunteering, caretaking and belonging to organisations cluster together) or a synthetic approach (e.g., Active Ageing Index, as computed by UNECE/EC (2015)). However, such measures continue to require theoretical backing and empirical validation.

In an attempt to overcome the dichotomy active-passive and to encompass a wider variety of possible activities, we propose a model of active ageing which provides an integrated view on the repertoire of actions involved in active ageing, allows for inter-individual and cross-cultural variations and takes into account individual motivation. Moreover, we validate the measure cross-nationally using external validation, showing that it relates as expected with variables measuring individual capacities and contextual opportunities.

In doing so, we make use of three sets of theories:

- a) activity theory (Havighurst et al., 1961; Knapp, 1977)
- b) role extension theory (Wilson, Musick, 2002; Choi, Burr, Mutchler, Caro, 2007)
- c) life strategy and culture as a tool kit (Swindler, 1986).

Active Ageing is understood here as a set of strategies employed by mature/old adults to meet their objectives in daily life, by combining various activities and strategic actions, depending on their own capabilities and contextual constraints. Based on their own needs, motivations, and resources, mature adults select and combine tools/ actions from the tool kit provided by their own culture. Thus, active ageing strategies depend on the repertoires of actions/ *tool kit* available in society and on the institutional framework (e.g. labour market, welfare policies). As a consequence, there are several articulated strategies available to mature adults, combining various tools.

Data and methods

To measure active ageing, we employ Latent Class Analysis using variables which measure employment, volunteering, housework, care for children and grandchildren and care for long term ill and disabled. For validation, we assess the results of a multi-level multinomial logistic regression. Moreover, structural equations modelling is then used to test the cross-cultural equivalence of the measurement model.

For the purpose of this study, we make use of European Quality of Life Survey 2016 data set for individual level data of adults aged 65+ which are not in residential care, and several sources for country-level data (Eurostat, World Bank, and EuroBarometer 393 from 2012).

Preliminary results

An integrated view of the repertoire of actions involved in active ageing implies that indicators of different domains are related. Thus, active ageing is a set of strategies to the extent to which it is captured by a latent variable with different classes, each of them combining different strategic actions. The results of the Latent Class Analysis show that indeed activities cluster together in predictable patterns of strategies.

Three groups emerge from the LCA analysis and they can be pictured as three concentric circles depending on the set of activities performed by group members: housekeepers (65% of the sample), for whom the dominant type of activity is housework; care providers (19% of the sample) who are mainly doing housework and care for family members; and lastly the pluriactive (16%), who are involved in housework and care-giving, as well as volunteering and formal employment.

Eastern and Central European countries, as some of the Mediterranean countries in our sample have larger shares of elderly engaged in housekeeping and smaller shares of elderly belonging to the two other groups. In Northern and Western countries, while the most numerous group is the housekeepers' one, the care-takers are better represented and the smallest group is the pluriactive one. However, strategies depend on individual circumstances and contextual factors.

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