icH&Hpsy 2018
4th International Conference on Health and Health Psychology

SUBJECTIVE HAPPINESS AND DEPENDENCE IN THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

Considering that aging as a dynamic process, accompanied by diverse transformations at the physical, psychological and social level, it is necessary to understand that this phase of the life cycle is conducive to experiencing positive emotions and feelings, such as happiness. This study aims to characterize the sociodemographic context of the elderly; to determine the level of dependence in activities of daily living; to evaluate the level of subjective happiness of the elderly and to verify if the sociodemographic variables and the level of dependence influence the subjective happiness experienced by the elderly. 102 elderly individuals participated in the study. The results indicated that 36.3% were mildly dependent and 45.6% were slightly unhappy. Regarding sociodemographic variables, the oldest (≥80 years) and the males are the ones with the highest level of happiness. The independent and lightly dependent elderly people, in the accomplishment of the activities of daily life, show higher mean values of happiness, but without statistical significance. Based on the results obtained, we conclude that it is necessary to outline strategies and plan interventions aimed at empowering the elderly to perform life activities, making them less dependent and with a better quality of life. Well-being will improve the way of perceiving life, enhancing the feeling of happiness.

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Keywords: Happiness, aging, elderly, dependency.

1. Introduction

For any living being, aging means simultaneously lasting and changing: to last is to remain the same over time and change is to become another over the years (Silva, 1998, quoted in Andrade and Martins, 2011). Aging is seen as a process and not as a state, which means that it is incorrect to characterize it solely and exclusively by the temporal factor. It is linked to a differential process in which each person ages individually and singularly.

This phenomenon entails a series of changes in the organization of personal, family, social and professional dynamics, determining the development of society. The problem of population aging and its evolution has been studied by several researchers in recent years, and it is necessary to motivate society in order to readapt and promote the creation of new policies directed to this reality

According to Crâmes (2012), aging is composed of three successive phases: the first phase in which organic changes do not manifest themselves in a notorious way, and the elderly are able to meet their needs; the second phase is characterized by some physical changes that culminate in the inability to satisfy some needs and finally, the third phase determines that the individual can no longer meet any of his needs and is considered totally dependent.

Since dependence is a key factor in the aging process, its evaluation must be taken into account, that is, the existence of an evaluative and classifying reference of its process of increase. The World Health Organization (WHO) has always had as its aim the goal of increasing the average life expectancy of humanity. Nowadays, it is considered a challenge to increase the life expectancy of the elderly, and it is necessary to foster appropriate conditions so that they have a good quality of life and well-being (Andrade & Martins, 2011). Although quality of life is an important factor in longevity, well-being and happiness of the population, there is no global consensus as to its definition.

Concerning well-being, this is generally considered as a set of several phenomena that integrate the emotional responses of individuals as well as their domains of satisfaction with life. Thus, the cognitive judgment of a specific domain in a person's life, the judgment and general assessment of one's own life, included in the overall assessment of the experiences experienced by the individual and the development of good emotions, are involved either in life satisfaction, subjective well-being and individual happiness. The latter culminates in a feeling that comes from within each person and is dependent on a set of factors that, when associated, contribute to individual well-being and quality of life (Carnada, 2015).

Thus, there is a need to understand the circumstances of the elderly at the national level, both from a social, psychic and affective point of view. This is because, the feeling of happiness is related to the evolution of the state of health, well-being and satisfaction with life, as well as with the environment that surrounds it.

Based on the previously mentioned, we aimed to characterize the socio-demographic context of the elderly, to know their level of dependence and to analyze the relation and influence of dependence on subjective happiness.

2. Problem Statement

Population aging marked by an increase in average life expectancy and changes in demographic indicators have contributed to the reversal of the demographic pyramid at the global level. Being an individual phenomenon, experienced in a singular way, this topic deserves a more in-depth reflection from the point of view of health. Given this reality, today's societies are trying to find ways to manage this situation by creating formal and informal support networks for elderly people, thus enabling them to meet their needs, to provide the experience of positive emotions and to achieve personal fulfilment. This state of positive emotions emerges as the result of the execution of vital and personal goals of global or specific nature, arising in any context that shows great relevance in the subject's life (Gil, 2014). Happiness, as positive emotion, reveals itself as a feeling that comes from within each person and that is dependent on a set of factors that, when associated, contribute to individual well-being. Among these factors are self-development of the individual, self-esteem and personal fulfillment (Carnada, 2015). In this way, self-development and the satisfaction of basic needs have a great influence on how the person experiences his daily life and his experiences. As aging is a phase of the life cycle replete with physical and intellectual transformations, it is important that the elderly experience it in a positive way.

The evaluation of the level of happiness experienced by the elderly and their relation to the level of individual dependence emerges as a potentially understandable problem that, in health, takes on a great importance in daily clinical practice, since it allows the design of integrated care plans and adapted to the individual conditions of the elderly.

3. Research Questions

Happiness, more than a physical phenomenon, possession or status, establishes a singular and concrete relation with the well-being and satisfaction of the individual with his life. The elderly to overcome all the transformations inherent in the aging process need to experience positive feelings, such as happiness, so that this is a stage of their life cycle full of meaning, privileging their individual needs and goals. In this sense, it is extremely important to know the level of happiness experienced by the elderly.

Thus, considering the need to situate the problem, we stated the following research question: "What is the level of subjective happiness of the elderly and what is the influence of sociodemographic variables and level of dependence on their happiness?"

4. Purpose of the Study

The carrying out of an investigation implies the development of a set of actions, in order to reach the objectives initially defined.

Following the research question stated above, the following objectives were outlined: characterizing the sociodemographic context of the elderly; to know their level of dependence in the accomplishment of the Activities of Daily Life (ABVD) and finally to analyze the relationship between the level of dependence and the subjective happiness of the elderly.

5. Research Methods

A quantitative, cross-sectional, descriptive-correlational study was conducted using a non-probabilistic, random sample composed of 102 elderly people from the municipality of Viseu.

This study included participants with a minimum age of 65 years and a maximum of 97 years, with a mean age of 82.74 years (± 6.50 years). For a better interpretation of the results and according to the report "Greater Portugal" developed by the DGS in 2014, the following age groups were defined: 65-79 years; At least 80 years old.

For the data collection process, which took place in 2017, to which all the participants responded voluntarily, always safeguarding the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected, the data collection instrument used consisted of several groups of questions, including a sociodemographic characterization, a Functional Scale of Daily Life Activities, and a Subjective Happiness Scale.

The Katz Index, referred to as the best method of assessing dependency level, by the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke (NINCDS) and Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders Association (ADRDA), refers to the ability of the elderly to perform ABVD, such as sanitizing, dressing, going to the toilet, sphincter control, mobilizing and feeding. (López & Martínez, 2016).

In order to evaluate subjective happiness, we used the Subjective Happiness Scale developed by Lyubomirsky and Lepper in 1999 and validated by Pais-Ribeiro for the Portuguese population in 2012. This scale includes psychometric properties identical to those of the original version can be used for comparison in cross-cultural research. The scale consists of four items. In two of them, respondents are asked to characterize themselves compared to their peers, both in absolute and relative terms. The other two items consist of descriptions of happiness and unhappiness. It is also asked for the elderly to indicate the extent to which the affirmations characterize them, and the answer is given on a visual scale with seven positions. The total score is obtained by averaging the answers in the four items. Higher scores correspond to greater subjective happiness. (Vilas Boas, 2016).

SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) programs for Windows was used for all data analysis.

6. Findings

Of all the elderly, 45.6% are not very happy and 40.6% are very happy. More than half of the female elderly (52.2%) report being unhappy, but 30.4% are very happy. Among the males, very happy elderly people (60.6%) prevail (Table 1).

Table 01. Level of subjective happiness of the elderly according to gender.

Gender	Male		Female		Total	
Level of subjective happiness	**nº (33)**	**% (32.4)**	**nº (69)**	**% (67.6)**	**nº (102)**	**% (100.0)**
Little happy	10	30.3	36	52.2	46	45.6
Moderately happy	3	9.1	12	17.4	15	14.7
Very happy	20	60.6	21	30.4	41	40.6

Of the elderly surveyed, 64.7% had mild or independent dependence (36.3% vs 28.4%). Women aged 80 years or older have higher levels of dependence compared to women aged 65-79 years. Men aged 80 years and older presented a lower percentage value in the level of mild dependency compared to those in the 65-79 age group (36.0% vs 62.5%) (Table 02).

In the 65-79 age group, men had a higher level of light dependence compared to women (62.5% vs 25.9%), but women were more independent than men (40.7% vs 37.5%) (Table 2).

In the elderly 80 and older, males compared to females presented only the highest percentage of total dependency (8.0% vs 7.1%) and independence in the performance of ABVD (32.0% vs 16.6%) (cf. Table 02).

Table 02. Dependency level according to age group and gender.

	Age	65-79 years				≥80 years				Total	
	Gender	Male		Female		Male		Female		N (102)	% (100.0)
		n (8)	% (7.8)	n (27)	% (26.4)	n (25)	% (24.5)	n (42)	% (41.2)		
Dependency level	Total dependency	0	-	1	3.7	2	8.0	3	7.1	6	5.9
	Severe dependency	0	-	3	11.1	2	8.0	6	14.3	11	10.8
	Moderate dependency	0	-	5	18.5	4	16.0	10	23.8	19	18.6
	Light dependence	5	62.5	7	25.9	9	36.0	16	38.1	37	36.3
	Independent	3	37.5	11	40.7	8	32.0	7	16.6	29	28.4

Age was not statistically significant with subjective happiness, but we can say that older (≥80 years old) males show a higher average subjective happiness rate (Table 3). The research conducted by Monteiro (2013) among 76 participants found that the elderly aged between 65 and 74 years experience higher levels of positive affection than those aged over 85 years. However, in the aforementioned study, male participants are the ones who are happier, which corroborates the results obtained. (see Table 03).

Table 03. U Mann Whitney test for the relation between gender, age, and subjective happiness

Variables	Subjective happiness	UMW	p
Gender			
Male	62.02	791.50	0.001
Female	46.47		
Ages			
65-79 years	45.49	962.00	0.136
≥80 years	54.64		

The results also show that the independent and lightly dependent participants show higher average values of subjective happiness, but with no statistical significance. (see Table 04). The study by Rodrigues (2011) contradicts these results and mentions that independent subjects report being very satisfied with life.

Table 04. Kruskal-Wallis test for the relationship between dependency and subjective happiness.

Dependency level	Subjective Happiness OM	X²	p
Total dependency	41.17		
Severe dependency	49.09		
Moderate dependency	42.68	4.29	0.37
Light dependence	57.91		
Independent	52.16		

7. Conclusion

This study, undertaken in this socio-demographic, socio-geographic and temporal context, aimed to evaluate the relationship between the level of dependence and happiness experienced by the elderly residents of the municipality of Viseu.

It was verified that age, from the statistical point of view, does not significantly influence the happiness experienced by the elderly. On the other hand, sex presents itself as a statistically influential variable of the level of happiness, with the elderly men showing the highest mean values of happiness. It was also found that the level of dependence does not exert any significant influence on the level of happiness.

Assuming the importance of experiencing positive feelings and emotions (happiness) by the elderly, the subject of subjective happiness in the elderly population emerges as a new line of research, promoting a more significant aging, allowing the creation of a more holistic view of the elderly with a particular focus on the emotional component.

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