

# Is healthy ageing for all? The role of positive views on ageing in preparing for a healthy old age in a precarious context

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Demographic changes during the last decades constitute a challenge for ensuring better and not just longer lives for ageing individuals. Active or positive ageing policy sets this as a goal and encourages individual and

collective strategies to optimize economic, social, cultural participation over the life course (Lassen & Moreira, 2014). Hence, preparation for old age and identification of psychosocial resources for ensuring a positive old age becomes a relevant issue for both research and intervention.

Among the most cherished psychological resources that may be used in preparation for old age are positive views on aging (Levy, 2003), meaning that one perceives more gains than losses associated with ageing, invests one's future with positive meaning and continues to set goals for old age. They were shown to stimulate involvement in preventive behaviour (Levy & Myers, 2004) like physical activity (Wurm, Tesch-Römer, Tomasik, 2007) or have a direct physiological effect on health (Levy, Hausdorff, Hencke, & Wei, 2000). Since views on ageing become increasingly connected with actual experiences during adult years (Levy, 2009) it becomes relevant to know how middle-aged individuals manage their experiences and resources for shaping their positive views on aging. Moreover, these emerge in a social context, and therefore might differ depending on education or social status and indirectly lead to experiencing health inequalities in old age or even during the preparation process. For instance, it was shown that people with lower education level hold

more negative views on ageing (Wurm, Berner, & Tesch-Römer, 2013). Thus, one may ask if all people can imagine a positive old age and ultimately, is positive aging possible for all?

Social inequalities were shown in previous studies to accumulate over the lifespan and result in health disparities in old age (Brandt, Deindl, & Hank, 2012). Besides low income or education, the type of profession or work one had was associated with poorer health and greater functional limitations in older adults (Corna, 2013). For instance, sociological studies pointed out the interesting situation of precarious workers, who are sometimes well-educated individuals who may also earn a good income, however with the drawback that their work contract is temporary and they lack a good pension insurance (Portacolone, 2013). Precariousness means living in "an age of uncertainty" where the State lacks resources and personal initiative for care is required (Bauman, 2007). More than missing financial resources as a low social-economic status (SES) would imply (Corna, 2013) or having a low education level, it refers to having to deal with the daily hassles of an uncertain future perspective, triggered by the instability of a temporary job or lack of retirement benefits. Thus, job and factual as well as perceived pension insecurity rather than low income or low education level itself determine bad health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005). Moreover, the uncertainty is said to be associated with the collapse of long-term thinking and planning and the social structures that sustain these. Thus, individuals are considered to live a fragmented life, filled with short-term projects where flexibility rather than long-term planning is required (Bauman, 2007).

Precariousness is not a phenomenon restricted to

developing countries, but affects well-developed states around the world like the USA, France or Italy (Portacolone, 2013). For instance, in Germany the rising number of mini jobs (i.e., jobs paid with 400 Euro) make saving for old age or engaging in health behaviours less probable. The prospect of poverty in old age becomes reality especially for freelancers, unemployed, or single mothers (Börsch-Supan, Gasche, & Lamla, 2013). The frequent change in career paths (i.e., part time jobs) and the increasing importance of private insurance contribute to the growing risk for poverty in old age (Schmäl, 2008). Nevertheless, perceiving positive aspects of growing old might stimulate one to identify resources to age in a good way, while negative perspectives on aging may hinder preparations as one could consider these unnecessary. Moreover, for individuals with an uncertain future perspective, imagining a positive old age and taking preparatory actions might be more difficult compared to financially secured individuals who can make plans for their retirement years. Thus, it becomes relevant to ask if precarious individuals have positive views on ageing and if so, if they are connected with preparatory actions for old age?

## Methods

Data are part of a larger research project on resources for positive ageing (see Craciun & Flick, 2014). For the present contribution, we chose to report findings based on the analysis of interviews with 10 persons with a precarious background (5 men and 5 women, living in Berlin, Germany). The *episodic interviews* (Flick, 2014) were used for data collection, since it allows both an investigation of semantic knowledge (concepts such as positive aging) and episodic knowledge (i.e., in which contexts or situations people think about positive aging). The original interview guide comprised several questions on preparing for positive aging. However, for the present study we selected questions about positive views on aging (e.g., "What does positive aging mean

to you? Can you give me some examples?"). Interviews were analysed following the principles of case specific thematic coding (Flick, 2014).

## Results

We distinguished four main themes related to the positive views on ageing held by individuals living in precarious circumstances.

### *The wise self*

For most interviewed individuals, the source of positive meaning in old age is that "one has a lot of experiences to share" (MW, m). However, the best way to enjoy wisdom in old age is by "Living in the moment...children are doing it and young people also, but in old age it has another quality, because there are more stories there...it is important not to be troubled by the stories from one's past or by one's biographies, but to live in the present with all your knowledge of the world" (MW, m). Planning too much what should happen in the future can lead to experiencing fears of not achieving it or can set unrealistic standards and thus lead to frustration.

### *The autonomous self*

Since physical health, mental fitness, and the ability to decide independently are important qualities for the daily lives of precarious persons, they project these as desired characteristics for a positive old age "you never know, but I wish that, no matter how old I get, I will stay independent..." (SK, m). Being engaged in several different activities gives positive meaning to old age and keeps a person fit and healthy. Since activities convey meaning in life, one participant highlighted the relevance of engaging in activities outside work. Otherwise, once you cannot work as before, your source of meaning in life disappears: "it is important to distance yourself from your work a bit and do other things....because if you identify with work completely than you end up with a

*feeling of meaninglessness when the work is not there anymore"* (CZ, m).

#### *Chameleon self*

The chameleon self represents the ability to constantly adapt to changing circumstances: *"I invent myself every year...in my line of work (freelance translator) I am obliged to do this every year anyway..."* (AL, f). Moreover, change is perceived as something positive and the challenge is to be open to accept it as one participant expressed: *"everything can be a new beginning...I just let it surprise me...I do not have such a clear image, I do not have a plan...but it does not bother me, it is too much work to always think about it, always worry, to plan...I don't care"* (CS, m). Another participant placed the self in the social context of constant change, characteristic of modern times: *"People invent themselves and reinvent themselves, they invent their jobs, this is the requirement, this is the reality today"* (JS, m). Far from being perceived as stressful, the idea of change is seen as something desirable and an opportunity of growth and development in old age: *"I hope that I will always discover new things. You learn new things and you want to...some people think that if someone is old then they do not learn anymore from the young..."* (MW, m). Thus, the requirement of flexibility may have been incorporated in the concept of self and redefined in positive terms in order to cope with the stress of being constantly *"on the move"*.

#### *The social activist self*

All interviewed individuals said that a social self is representative for positive old age. Being part of a social network, either of friends or family members is considered relevant as a source of positive meaning in old age. Mostly, interviewed middle-aged imagine living in a community apartment with friends in their old age, sharing expenses and doing activities together: *"when we are over 65 we can do things together...concerts, theatre, opera. Having fun*

*together and when the money is not there we can help each other just like in a family"* (MS, f). *"I imagine myself living with friends in a shared apartment, because of money issues...where we can cook together, we can share our rent and survive on little money but do many beautiful things..."* (CB, f). Some mentioned spending time with their families or enjoy being grandparents: *"it is also a lot of fun to take care of such a small individual; it opens up new horizons and perspectives"* (AL, f). Being socially active protects one from loneliness in old age and provides the very meaning of being human: *"...very important are human relations, that you have a social network, it does not have to be the family...but I guess the family is still very important despite all post-modern debates. I believe it is important...we are not virtual beings, we are social beings..."* (JS, m). Being part of a social network links one with younger generations and access to culture and new ideas: *"my image of positive aging would be that I walk slowly through Berlin with a walking stick but not a walker frame, no a beautiful walking stick and that I go in the evening to the concert at the philharmonic where also many young people go...take part in cultural life, if I could not do that it would be very sad..."* (MW, m).

## Discussion

This paper aimed at providing a better understanding of positive views on aging in an emerging precarious context (i.e., Lack of a secure job or pension plan combined with a perceived insecure future). Findings show that individuals in precarious circumstances tend to value wisdom and autonomy, lending support to previous studies on positive views on ageing (Jolanki, 2009; Yang, 2013). However, for these individuals, wisdom is mainly defined as *"living in the moment with all your acquired knowledge"*. They place emphasis on adaptability and flexibility more than on stability and long term planning, proving they have adjusted to their precarious living conditions. Even if the future does not take the form

of clear stages and transitions, interviewed precarious persons perceive a future for their old age and invest it with positive meanings. They aim to remain autonomous and make plans on how to achieve this in their old age, thus confirming the existence of positive views on ageing, as defined in previous literature (Wurm et al., 2007). The emerging positive view on ageing in precarious circumstances shares a number of similarities with the positive views on ageing as previously defined (Wurm et al., 2007). The wisdom and autonomy components match the development aspect of positive views on ageing. The desire for autonomy corresponds to a prevention of physical losses that might directly interfere with independence, while the social activist implies the prevention of social losses. The difference lies in the emphasis placed on flexibility, namely the flexible adjustment to situations, and less on long-term planning and future directed thinking, which are important components of the positive view on ageing as described before. Planning and long-term thinking may characterize the positive views of people with secure pension plans as shown by Craciun and Flick (2014). Moreover, positive views on ageing of precarious individuals comprise concrete preparatory actions such as social engagement, but less for health behaviours such as physical activity (Klusmann, Evers, Schwarzer, & Heuser, 2012) which may affect their health and functionality in old age.

## Conclusions and practical implications

The study raised the issue of investigating precariousness in addition to only looking at the SES of persons, when exploring their views on ageing. It sought to stimulate further thought regarding how to plan behaviour change interventions for individuals ageing in precarious circumstances, who may value flexibility over structured planning and social activities over engagement in health behaviours. For individuals who are in a precarious situation, a positive view on ageing might mean social

engagement and flexibility in dealing with choices rather than the ability to set goals and make plans to engage in health behaviours, as described in previous definitions of positive views on ageing. As an implication for practice, interventions that integrate goal flexibility and social engagement in promoting health behaviour might be more successful than those focusing on planning and goal setting or action control. In this sense, positive ageing is there to be achieved by all, only the positive views people hold regarding their old age differ according to their present work circumstances and pension plans. Since changing precarious circumstances may not constitute the direct target of health psychologists, the latter may focus on adjusting interventions to the positive views of ageing of precarious individuals rather than attempt to change the views of ageing that these people hold and make them more positive than they already are.

### Note

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