

# Aging population and the current account of the Third Age

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## ABSTRACT ITALIANO

## ENGLISH ABSTRACT

### 1. The scenario: progressive aging of the population

Since the second half of the twentieth century, following the conclusion of the process of demographic transition, which involved the most advanced countries, there has been a lengthening of life expectancy, due to the improvement of social conditions and health and hygiene. By analyzing the changes that have occurred in the last three decades<sup>1</sup>, it is possible today to resume and confirm the need to put at the center of policy the theme of aging in modern society, challenge launched in 1982 in Vienna by the United Nations at the First World Assembly on Ageing.

The comparison of the age structure of the population from the years 2005 to 2050 shows a significant reduction of the central age groups, while the elderly population will occupy a considerable percentage of the Italian population. This evolution of the aging of the population has significant implications in the programming policy of social welfare and also assumed a social dimension in the aspects related to the perception of the condition of the elderly (Burgalassi, 1985). It is therefore evident that aging is a "problem" not only of individuals but that affects the lives of everyone, including the architecture of social, cultural and religious whole society. The progressive aging of the population is, without doubt, one of the challenges that society must facing in this new century.

### 2. The strategy of the WHO and the European Union

Given this scenario, the WHO (World Health Organization) 1 in 2002 has drawn a strategy for health promotion and enhancement of the ultra 64 years age classes person, indicated by the name of "Active aging", which aims to encourage all those actions that are able to slow the functional decline of the elderly and to counteract the onset of chronic diseases. "Active aging" is defined

as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to improve the quality of life of older people." In addition to the concept of "active aging", both European and international guidelines, promote, in many areas (political, social, health and education), the "intergenerational solidarity", to which the European Union has dedicated the year 2012 (AGE Platform Europe, 2012) and lifelong learning, by promoting specific programs of ongoing education at the European level. It is, in fact, promoted intergenerational cooperation in terms of a continuous and mutual learning and a renewed construction of the concept of active citizenship and social. It appears necessary to foster communication, social relations and the mutual recognition of skills and knowledge between different generations, with a view of improving the quality of life and a more informed citizenry.

### **3. The third age: educability and skills**

Before highlighting the benefits offered by intergenerational relationships should mention briefly that the current era reserve to the "third age". The prevalent family model until after World War II is that of the patriarchal family. In this framework the older man plays a predominant role. Being elderly gave, in fact, respect and even the right to broadcast in a uni-directional way knowledge, practices and behavioral value orientations to younger (Pati, 2010). Compared to the way of life of the past century where Elder held an important function of link between the generation of the present and those of the past by acting as example and incentive for the child, the situation is completely reversed. Today the importance of transmission is dominated by the exaltation of the innovations that eventually overwhelm the image of the elderly, fewer holders of knowledge and, consequently, more and more at risk of social and cultural marginalization. (Galimberti, 2009; Rossi, 2012; Frabboni, Pinto Minerva, 2013). Within this perspective adulthood, especially the elderly, require a redefinition of identity pedagogically speaking, that highlights the prospect of "educability" and enhances skills (Bélanger, Federighi, 2000), trying to remove the traditional stereotype of the elderly as socially useless because now unproductive. It seems, in fact, that the elderly have to demonstrate that they are still capable of doing something, not to be a burden on society. Although defined as "lucky generation" (Vegetti Finzi, 2008, p. 49), because most long-lived thanks to advances in medicine and health care, and on average richer, having benefited from the "economic miracle" of the sixties, they now often live alone, marginalized and in the absence of the love of family. Certainly They live longer, but it is neither proven nor established that they live more peacefully, more appropriately looked after and respected and understood. Marginalization provokes strong inner feelings (such as the sense of liabilities), and questions related to the search for meaning in this last stretch of the journey of life to deal with often with great difficulty. According to the philosopher Natoli this situation is precisely a result of inter-generational communication difficulties: "One of the most tragic reasons of loss of quality in contemporary life was the break between old and young; the continuity of the experience was stopped and then everyone has to start all over again. The old, not knowing to whom to communicate their wealth of experience, wither; while young people do not grow or grow poorly, because they have no experience with which to compare " (Natoli, 2006, p. 41). Since the role, also between young and old, especially with the institutionalization in nursing homes, has changed, it appears to be severely compromised the reciprocity between generations.

### **4. Intergenerational dialogue: a complex perspective**

According to Erik Erikson, one of the first psychologists to describe the social development in the course of life, the final stage of emotional development is experienced during old age. During this

stage, people try to find meaning in their lives and make sense of the life they have lived. More contact with the younger generation may, in fact, help the elderly to have a greater sense of fulfillment.

In the psychological literature those of the young and those of the elderly are defined as "two different worlds." Intergenerational relations, in fact, can bring benefits to both.

For example, these relationships can: provide an opportunity for both to develop new skills; give aims to children and older adult; alleviate fears that children may have of the elderly; help children understand and accept aging with more serenity; invigorate and stimulate the elderly; reduce the risk of depression in the elderly; reduce the isolation of the elderly; fill a void for those children who no longer have their grandparents; Children receive affection and attention unconditional; help keep alive the family memories and their stories.

A great barrier to the rapprochement between generations is created by the messages that the company offers about the elderly: in advertising and fiction we find youth actively promoted at any cost, the maintenance of youth as an objective, and seem to suggest that aging is a conviction, increasing consequently, negative thoughts and feelings toward the elderly.

According to Piaget, cognitive skills of children develop when they build, refine, select and interpret informations with their current understanding of the world (which is modified according to their life experiences). Children tend to be very concrete in their thinking: "what they see is what they know." If children do not interact with the elderly, will surely have a hard time understanding them, as well as in the elderly is crystallized an idea of child corresponding to the dynamics of the current development.

It is necessary to provide more opportunities for children to become familiar with the elderly (and vice versa), so as to promote a better perception of aging and a more responsive childhood. Negative perceptions of children about the elderly increases with age and in this sense the development of positive relationships at an early age would help reduce the negative perception.

Adolescence requires a more complex discussion: adolescents tend to be more focused on their present and thinking mainly to themselves and became less interested in learning about older adults. Numerous studies in the literature have shown that, in adolescence, the brain is still under development. This means that the ability to make decisions and to control thoughts and impulsive behavior is not yet fully developed. Because teenagers can show negative behavior that are difficult to understand for the elderly, they will need guidance and encouragement to understand the elderly and the implications of aging. Baschiera (2014), Baschiera shows that among adolescents there are very strong stereotypes about the 'elderly age. Boys of 15 years old and older attribute to people over 65 years old features such as frailty, weakness, loneliness, withdrawal into oneself, social maladjustment, physical decline, low quality of life, low quality of life, mental rigidity, orientation to the past and relational inability.

Act on the younger generation represents an important opportunity to train future adults that are more aware and able to undermine stereotypes towards older generations. In another study by Baschiera (2014) it was speculated that through intergenerational learning it was possible to change the stereotypes related to the different stages of life emerging from the collective imaginary, to develop and exploit the educational potential of the elderly for on active aging and finally enhance the relational competence between subjects of different ages. The sample consisted of 314 pre-teens (between 10/11 and 13/14 years old) and 100 elderly (between 65 and 85 years). In this study the boys 10/11 years old have shown more interest in working on the emotional / relational dimension, the boys of 13/14 years old on the historical memory and the boys under 12 years old in the dimension of writing. An interesting consideration is that older people with higher levels of

education are the less available at the intergenerational exchange, albeit in complex there were improvements in relation to the degree of harmony and interest before and after the implementation of activities of intergenerational exchange. Similarly the results of the elderly are evident previously and following the interventions. According to the interpreters of the research they have learned to more adequately reflect on themselves and their own emotions, to adapt and understand the value of education. From a cognitive point of view they developed new skills, they had occasion to use the memory, maintain focus and process information. They also learned to share learning, cooperate, get involved and discuss.

### **5. The benefits of the relationship between generations**

In 1999 Toshio Ohsako of 'UNESCO organized a meeting in Dortmund, Germany, for researchers of ten different countries, dealing with intergenerational programs. In this meeting it was agreed the following definition: "The Intergenerational programs are vehicles for the targeted exchange and continuous resources and learning among older and younger generations." (Boström, HattonYeo, Toshio Ohsako e Yukiko Sawano, 2000, p 3).

In a study from the University of Sassari (Nuvoli, Casu, 2013) it was investigated the benefit brought by the intergenerational relations. In this study, the sample consisted of n. 16 pairs of participants, each composed of an old man and a boy. The members of each pair have played for the partners, the role of teacher and that of student. The results seem to confirm the hypothesis that spending time together in various activities change the relationship between the generations. In the eyes of the boys, the elder went from marginal figure of the family and society to rich experiential and emotional source. The elderly appear to play as pedagogical mediators in the insertion of youth in the environmental dynamic. Also besides not being seen anymore as a marginal figure in the family and society, he can become a rich experiential and emotional source from which to draw, without the mediation of the middle generation. The greater availability of the boys to consider the elderly as a point of reference to listen to and follow, favors the possibility of obtaining "material" for the construction of the self, as well as useful interpretation of their context.

Previous international research already emphasized the benefits of intergenerational relations (Chapman, Neal, 1990). An intergenerational program in order to bring older people and adolescents and to examine other examples of intergenerational programs aimed at determining the effects. The components of the program allowed the elderly and adolescents to act either as helpers or as recipients of aid. Before participating in the program it was examined the "quantity" of intergenerational contact. Teenagers who have helped the elderly, proved to had more fun in being with older people, a decreased social distance and a more positive perception of the attitudes towards the elderly. In another study (Aday, Sims, Evans, 1991), were examined changes in the perception of children regarding the elderly as a result of participation in a intergenerational project of 9 months about aging. The project involved 24 students of the fourth grade of elementary school with 24 elderly subjects from a center for the elderly. The project involved a series of joint activities throughout the school year. For comparative purposes, these students were matched with a control group (n = 25). Pstarting from the perceptions of children with respect to aging, in the experimental group emerged much more positive attitudes toward the elderly compared to the control group ( $t = 2.79$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Statements by the experimental group also show a very positive attitude towards their own aging. Hutton-Yeo & Ohsako (2000) emphasize that there is a need to move from the traditional one-way learning (the young man who learns from Elder) to a learning based on mutual relations between different generations, but also the need to

develop mutual learning not from family: therefore the possibility to interact constantly. More recently, other studies have shown the benefits of such relationships (Meshel, MCGlynn, 2010). The attitudes of adolescents at the end of the research were more positive and even the elderly showed more positive attitudes towards young people and a significant improvement in the perception of one's life and satisfaction. The relationship between children and elderly people living with dementia, as in the study by Chung (2009), demonstrated benefits. Chung examined data resulting from a program of reminiscence, adopting an intergenerational approach, with the elderly characterized by dementia praecox and young volunteers. The study suggests mutual benefits. In the same way Celdrán, Triadó, Villar (2009) have explored the relationship between teenagers and grandparents with dementia. Among the adolescents emerged more statements on the value of life, and even changes in coping strategies adopted, such as increased patience and responsibility. Skropeta, Colvin and Sladen S., (2014) have explored the benefits of participation in an intergenerational program in care settings for older people, in which the elderly, and people with dementia have interacted with a number of people of different generations. This has increased the perception of the dignity of the elderly and people with dementia in the community and fostered greater public awareness about the support services and existing support available to them. What emerges is a strong benefit brought by intergenerational relations although it is important to emphasize the importance of the quality of the time spent together and the importance of frequent visits that enable two generations to bind more easily than occasional visits. It 'also important to be aware of the limitations from both and try to find activities that are of interest to both generations to ensure a positive experience. The extension of working life may, therefore, be an opportunity for the current society if the change in the field of welfare is directed towards an appropriate model to the challenges of the moment.

#### **6. Our experience: university students and institutionalized elderly**

The aim of this contribution is to highlight the relational and cognitive benefits of a research performed through reading. Young college students interacted every day, for three months, with institutionalized elderly in situations of advanced dementia, by reading them aloud. Through materials emerged from logbooks and reports related to the the research we will highlight the benefits and changes produced. The results of the training have already been highlighted in "Reading, memory and dementia: a pilot study" ( Batini, Bartolucci, 2014).

The research aimed to determine the effects of a training reading of 55 meetings on cognitive performance and memory of elderly people suffering from various stages and types of dementia, with serious impairment of the average levels of understanding and memory. What emerged is the effectiveness of reading aloud in delaying or otherwise slow down, at least temporarily the effects of these diseases (Batini, Bartolucci, 2014; Berns G., Blaine K., Prietula M., Pye B. E. 2013; Billington et al, 2013). Logbooks produced by readers<sup>2</sup> and shared by the group of students who alternated during the week (thus benefiting the story and earnings relational colleagues), report the texts used daily, the mode of interaction and the development of quality training in relations to various sizes observed by students themselves, but also more impressionistic annotations (Batini, 2011 a; 2011b). In this way the students could not only write down the facts and not the individual meetings, but also to begin a process of shared reflection that has inevitably led to a reorganization of the collective that has taken the shape, of course, of fiction.

These diaries also contain a significant amount of information and "impressions" of individual readers in relation to their emotional state and interaction with patients.

The experience of reading aloud has seen students become key players, but also allowed the el-

derly themselves to emerge gradually as individuals and allowed the sharing of two different generations between which it as been created an increasingly close relationship. Despite initial mixed feelings, such as embarrassment, fear of not being able to relate or not to be accepted, to feel strangers in their own home care and lives, the boys lived, progressively, older people as if they were their grandparents, coming to ties and interactions more and more significative for both parties. Participating students are initially disoriented, with notations sometimes erratic as the mood of the elderly themselves. Gradually these elements, constitute less and less a problem thanks to the shift of the elderly towards curiosity and openness.

For the students involved training feedbacks were important (Batini, Giusti, a cura di, 2009). They shared time, emotions and stories with patients of three nursing homes in the territory of Arezzo and Perugia: RSA Ninci and RSA Pionta of Arezzo; Rsa Fontenuovo of Perugia. The training lasted a total of 55 meetings, initially for 20-30 minutes up to an overall hour of reading for every meeting, for a period of about three months at the end of which a report was prepared by the students themselves.

“...A significant research, at the same time important not only as work experience but also as life experience.....”. In this way it began the story of this adventure of students involved. It is evident the strength of the exchange: reading the story can become the means for a deep empathy: the reading can allow vicarious experiences and thus to accumulate along meanings, emotions, actions.

## 7. Logbooks Analysis

We first analyze logbooks produced by the students by reading and extrapolating all the key expressions, facts and meaningful words from everything's was written, related to dimensions of participation in the training, emotional involvement, interpersonal exchange and, in general all the contents that were showing a certain interaction (or absence of it) between patients and students, in order to qualitatively analyze the course of the entire training. At a first look we noticed that the categories we were investigating were actually changing during the progression of the days of training. We then decide to separate the logbooks in three distinct groups, each related to a precise interval of time: the first four weeks (the beginning of the training) the second four weeks (middle of training) and the last four weeks (the end of the training). We then combine under this criteria the logbooks related to the training done in the three RSA. The result three documents were analyzed in Nvivo software <sup>3</sup> by creating two different group nodes (positive vs. negative aspect of interaction between patients and students). The first group nodes were related to the negative aspects of interaction between patients and students and included nodes named: disinterest, diffidence, weariness and difficulty of comprehension; the second group were related to the positive aspects and included: attention, arousal, involvement, interpersonal exchange and empathy. After we identified in all three documents all the phrases, expressions words and chunk of text related to each of the nodes we created, we analyzed for each temporal related document the amount of occurrences of every node in order to analyze whether the negative and positive nodes were changing over time.

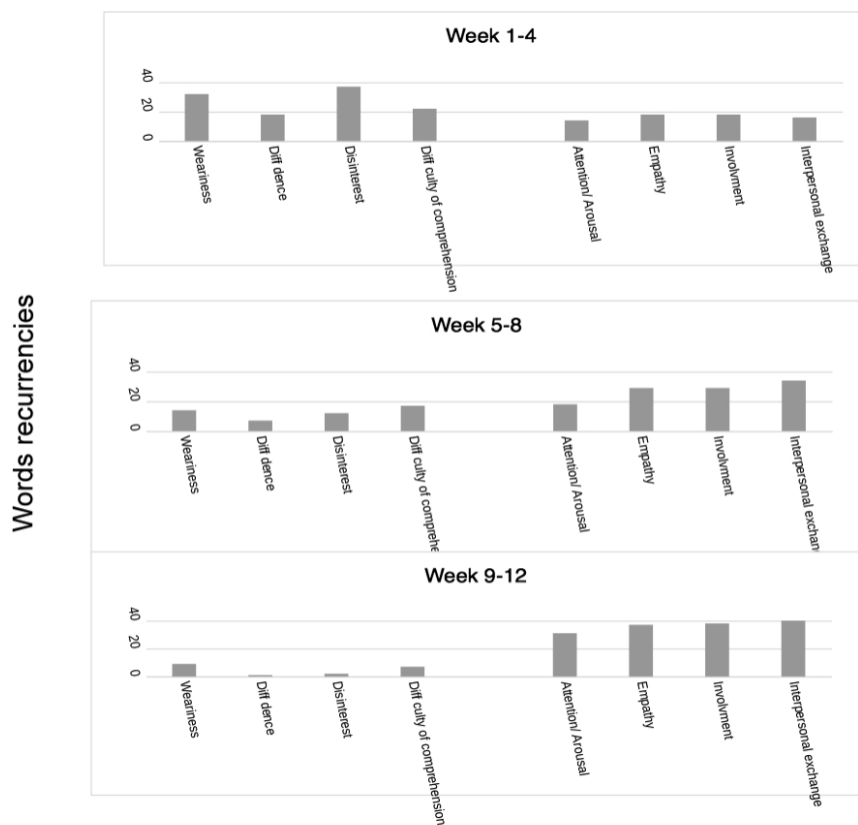


Fig. 1 Word recurrences across weeks. Positive nodes are increasing during time as negative ones decrease

Results show a clear reduction of the negative nodes over time and a clear enhancement over time of the positive nodes, indicating a change in the quality of the structure and contents of the training sessions over time. Even if some negative aspect as tiredness and difficulties are still present in the last sessions of the training (surely because of the cognitive impairment of the patients), those are in numbers of occurrence lower than the first and second part of the training. As the negative aspects were reducing, the positive aspects were increasing diametrically and all this indicate a clear increase in the personal exchange between patients and students in terms of shared moments, opinions, stories and personal memories.

### 8. Students reports analysis

The change we see from the first analysis suggests clearly that, as the personal and emotional exchange this kind of training can produce, a highly emotional and really meaningful impression on the students about the entire experience was building up inside the thoughts of the students who carried out the experiment. Thus, to evaluate the content of the output impressions of the students about this experience, we analyzed the content of the reports they had to write at the end of the experiment. Thus, we analyzed in Nvivo the occurrence of meaningful words used in the reports.



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## Note

1 Advances in medical science, improvements in sanitation, employment and increased power quality have prolonged life and seem to have moved forward the age of physical decay and old age itself. The next few years will lead to an acceleration of the phenomenon even more obvious "aging population", especially for the female population.

2 Students courses of Research methodology in education, observation, evaluation (Education Sciences) and Experimental Education (Science and Psychological techniques of mental processes) held by Federico Batini at the Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education )

3 NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International. It has been designed for qualitative researchers working with very rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required

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