

# The New Social and Identitary Models of Old People—*Deepening the Concept of Successful Ageing*

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**How to cite this paper:** Klein, A. (2022) The New Social and Identitary Models of Old People—*Deepening the Concept of Successful Ageing*. *Advances in Aging Research*, 11, 91-97.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/aar.2022.114007>

**Received:** March 27, 2022

**Accepted:** June 18, 2022

**Published:** June 21, 2022

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## Abstract

The concept of ageing society includes the quantitative factor that there will be more and more older people according to population transitions. But, at the same time, qualitative factors such as quality of life, identity changes and the experience of high changes in the subjectivity need to be included alongside these quantitative factors. So, the purpose and significance of the paper indicate that is necessary to ensure structures that can tolerate the new scenarios of this current generation of older people, who seek new life options, renewed emotional perspectives and transgenerational confrontation with traditional models of ageing and grandparenthood.

## Keywords

Old People, Subjectivity Experimentation, Identity Quality

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## 1. Introduction: Demographic and Population Data

The advanced demographic transition that countries around the world are going through, to a greater or lesser extent, has often been described in terms of a “challenge”. This challenge refers to the adaptations and reconfigurations that governments and States must approach in the face of an increasingly ageing society and a population replacement rate that is becoming negative or non-existent. The reconfigurations of urban planning, buildings, health, education, pensions, employment, social and family policies are part of an agenda that demands attention and debate, and in the face of which procrastination and denial can lead to real dead ends for society as a whole [1].

If we take the year 2050 as a chronological reference, it is estimated that by that date older adults around 60 or 65 years of age will represent almost 36.8% of

the total population, the 80-year age group will represent 18.2% of the total population and, significantly, there will be almost 12% of older adults approaching 100 years of age [2] [3].

Let us take as an example a European country, Spain, and a Latin American country, Mexico.

Life expectancy at birth in Spain in 2009 was around 65 years for almost 90% of the children born that year, and of this percentage it was expected that around 30% could reach 90 years of age, which is also accompanied by a sustained decline in infant mortality rates [4]. This decline in mortality is, therefore, not sufficient to compensate for the possibility of population replacement, which has persisted in Spain since 1987. In 2015 it stood at 1.32. Only Portugal is probably lower, with a very low rate of 1.21 [5] [6]. The number of older adults in Spain in 2009 was estimated at 8 million people (IMSERSO, 2009). But by 2050, Spain will have 16 million older adults, representing almost 30% of the total Spanish population [7] [8]. Therefore, the number of older adults will double.

Similarly, the population in Mexico underwent important transformations throughout the 20th century. As a result of these changes, the population has increased, the age structure of the population has changed and the relative number of older adults has increased [9]. In figures, in 2010 there were just over ten million older adults living in Mexico [10] [11]. Between 1990 and 2010, their number increased from 5 to 10 million, with a percentage increase of 2.8% of the total population; that is, older adults went from 6.2% to 9% of the total population [4] [12].

So, by 2020 the population of older adults is already 14 million individuals; 12.1 percent of the population. From that year onwards, the population growth rate would start to slow down, reaching a negative growth (-1.58 percent) in 2050, when there are expected to be around 34 million older adults, representing 27.7 percent of the total population [13].

Average life expectancy at birth in Mexico increased from 36 years in 1950 to 74 in 2000 and that by 2050 it will reach 80 years, a figure in the range of that projected for developed countries. It is perhaps important to note that, unlike in developed countries, in non-developed countries the process of population ageing is occurring at a faster pace, with a number of variables that make it difficult for society to adapt to this process, adding new ones to already chronic social problems [14].

Probably never before in human history have so many people, on a sustained basis, approached these “matusalenic” experiences. Never before has humanity faced the challenge of restructuring its streets, its architecture, its cities, its care and health practices, its social and public policies. The agenda of changes to be faced implies profound modifications of all kinds, involving not only socio-cultural, but also economic and productive transformations that we are just beginning to outline [15]. However, more than a few experts suggest that the “window of opportunity” has already closed or is closing inexorably for

Europe, in relation to the magnitude and consistency of the changes to be made [16].

This paper does not reject these premises, but rather indicates that the “ageing society” is faced with the ambivalence of either accepting the changes imposed by demographic and population data, including the identity changes of the emerging new class of older adults, or it will deny or postpone the necessary changes, trying by all means to relegate older adults to traditional roles of decrepitude, infantilisation and guardianship.

The recent experience of COVID-19 indicates that society is actually on a scale with respect to older adults, with little difficulty in confining them, de-citizenising them and confronting them with ominous experiences of death and social deprivation [17].

## 2. The Concept of “Successful” Ageing

The concept of “active” or “successful” ageing has been slowly but inexorably gaining ground in the field of new paradigms of old age. While retaining the term “ageing”, this new perspective aims to invert the conception of old age in terms of deficit, decline or decrepitude, emphasizing the generative and productive capacity of the older adult, repositioning him or her as a relevant actor in social events. It emphasizes continuity rather than discontinuity; resilience and potential rather than loss and deficit; and the potential and possibilities that ageing might imply, thus suggesting new forms of social insertion, indicating what the older adult is able to contribute to society [18].

Some specific aspects of successful aging are related with new love and bond experimentations, new kind of community participation, new kind of relationships with families and specially with grandsons, and perhaps it is also necessary to emphasize the new models of political participation, around experiences of resilience and empowerment [19].

From another point of analysis, the relevance of maintaining satisfactory interpersonal relationships and productive activities, which result in the ability to maintain a factor of autonomy and self-care, among others, with which the older adults can face and solve their problems in a satisfactory way, maintaining their insertion in everyday life, is pointed out [20].

It will be noted that these authors discard the need for the older adult to live apart or withdrawn from the family or social world, interned in asylums, institutions or others, clearly emphasizing the possibility of establishing or shaping satisfactory projects that include deep interpersonal relationships, high self-esteem and proactive social insertion. Thus, it could be suggested that the concept of “successful” ageing is being enriched, in the sense that it is no longer understood only as the absence of persistent illness or decrepitude, but as older adults’ reformulation of their insertion into social life, decisively reshaping their personal biography in terms of adequate achievements and a fulfilling future [21].

### 3. The Third Age as Stage of High Subjectivity Experimentation

In this sense, and due to the different changes in the subjective and cultural spheres, the quality of life we want to insist on is not only that of the healthiest older adults (which ultimately refers to a geriatric paradigm) but that of older adults as a generalized group, embarked on an identity “explosion”, which places them in a stage of high subjective experimentation. It should be noted that a specific characteristic of these older adults is that they no longer see “death” in front of them (precisely in terms of quality of life achievements, able to postpone death almost indefinitely), but a second or third chance of life, that is, not only an extension of the years of life, but also the unnecessary need to build their life project around the issue of death [22].

Older adults are thus experiencing a time of change and renewal. A fundamental factor is the possibility of consolidating different networks and new forms of bonding, which allows the recognition of a new ageing as a place of solidarity, the updating of imaginaries and essential bonds of fraternity and the consolidation of new forms of self-management and protection in the face of processes of helplessness [23].

At the same time, old age anticipates the renewal of the promise of new opportunities, new perspectives and new challenges. A subjectivity with new opportunities begins to take shape, in which the figure of the decrepit old person is replaced by that of an agent of empowerment, with an astonishing energy and capacity for change. Older adults appropriate a new version of themselves, possessing a future that is transformed into a future that imposes itself in order to improve the quality and style of life. The “older person” has definitely given way to the “older adult”, as a configuration of subjectivity capable of assuming the risk and opportunities of new lifestyles, but framed in the conviction of the opportunity to possess a future, and to be better than he or she is [24].

At this point, the different negotiated life options that the older adult rethinks: vocational, marital, divorce, understood as opportunities for improvement through a crisis that expresses the feeling of confidence, security and continuity provided by this second or third opportunity to change, improve and deepen the existential options of the older adult [25].

### 4. The New Model of Old Age

This field of high subjective experimentation thus finds a framework of reasonable expectation of proactivity, well-being and dignified life, revealing a structure of care and protection. The new age thus becomes a possible world of people who wish to live, care for themselves, grow, as well as experience new things. So, the model of old age as something precarious, deficient and exhausted is definitively delegitimized, making it almost offensive to speak of “old man” or “old woman” [26].

The idea of the older adult or post-adult is imposed. The variety of names in-

dicates that, deep down, no denomination is entirely precise. There is an excess or a lack of names, but apparently never a totally pertinent name is ever reached, giving an account of a state of emerging identities. These situations of high subjective experimentation together with high semantic experimentation seem to indicate that the third age is experiencing as an age group and as a cultural experience, the emergence of new subjectivities, “emergent” subjectivities, which sometimes become “abrupt”, as they confront us with cultural, identity and epistemological experiences of extreme novelty [27].

Hypothetically, however, three processes could be proposed that seem to predominate in the achievement of this high subjective experimentation: 1) transgenerational confrontation (these older adults refuse to be like the old people or grandparents of yesteryear or those who preceded them); 2) reorganization of the age group of adolescents, adults and older adults, into diffuse and interchangeable groupings, where each of the traditional age groups receives characteristics from the others; 3) impossibility of maintaining the place of the “old man” as the transmitter of a “sacred” and irreplaceable word. Loss of ancestral memory that ultimately implies that the word of the ancestors has become unnecessary, insofar as it no longer marks models of conduct or codes of ethics to be strictly followed [28].

In any case, it is necessary to point out that if these older adults express an “abrupt” subjectivity, it is also in the sense of conveying an impressive amount of quantitative and qualitative changes that are neither generationally unprecedented nor fully explained by social structure, generational change, advances in medical technology or cultural climate. All contribute, but probably none of them can reliably explain it [29].

## 5. Conclusions

The figure of what used to be called “old” or “elder” and today “old” or “ageing” condenses several of the reflections and dilemmas raised in the current cultural and social changes that are under revision and renewal. In this way, and in one way or another, the traditional identity of older adults is questioned, raising the debate of a situation of high subjective experimentation in the form of “emerging subjectivity” that implies a profound social questioning of what is understood by old age and ageing [30].

So, the argument of this paper indicates that is necessary, according to these population transitions, to ensure structures that can tolerate the new scenarios of this current generation of older people, who seek new life options, renewed emotional perspectives and transgenerational confrontation with traditional models of ageing and grandparenthood.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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