Educational Gerontology

Reasons for Older Adult Participation in University Programs in Spain

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REASONS FOR OLDER ADULT PARTICIPATION IN UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS IN SPAIN

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This study examined the reasons expressed by older adults for attending a university program in Barcelona (Spain). Results were based on the responses of 36 elders to questions from a semistructured interview. These were (a) reasons for joining a university course and (b) factors that prevent enrolling in that course. Participants mentioned more expressive than

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instrumental reasons for participating in a university program. Most mentioned barriers to entering university that were lack of interest, lack of self-confidence, health problems, and limited information. These results are discussed in the context of new strategies to improve university courses aimed at the elderly.

Most older people, especially those younger than 80, show an acceptable level of autonomy and health, and are usually highly motivated to perform activities and find the time needed to carry them out. Such an optimistic perspective on ageing, far from the traditional stereotypes of dependency and passivity, is recognized through concepts such as "active ageing." This concept underlines the capacity of older adults to participate in social, economic, cultural, and civic activities and not just their ability to be physically active. It has been adopted by the World Health Organization since the late 1990s in order to convey a more inclusive and complex view of older people (WHO, 2002). Active ageing emphasises the rights and responsibilities of older people and is meant to provide a framework for policy proposals and the development of programs aimed at enhancing the quality of life and social participation of older people.

Active ageing was a central concept discussed during the Second World Assembly on Ageing, which was convened by the United Nations in 2002. The document that resulted from this assembly, the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing* (United Nations, 2002), aimed to set the context for global policies on ageing for the current century. This policy framework made promoting education and capacity-building in older age key priorities for integrating older generations into a society for all ages. Thus, the participation of older people in educational programs is not only an indicator of active ageing, but also something which paves the way to a more active and community-involved lifestyle (Davey, 2002).

In this context, universities, as institutions designed to generate and spread knowledge, are key players in the provision of educational opportunities for older people. In Europe, this fact has been recognized since at least the early 1970s. That is when Pierre Vellas, at the University of Toulouse, designed a special educational program for older people, thus starting the Third Age University (U3A) movement. At approximately the same time in England, there appeared what are known as "open universities," a model of U3A in which, unlike the French approach, the initiative and organization were driven not by academics but by older learners.

Regardless of the model followed, university programs for older people have multiplied in recent decades to become a global movement

with a presence in countries as diverse as Finland (Yenerall, 2003); Italy (Principi & Lemura, 2009); Australia (Swindell, 1993); Taiwan (Huang, 2005); and Japan and Canada (Hori & Cusack, 2006). In Spain, the involvement of universities in education for older people dates back to the early 1980s. The first programs, consisting basically of a number of lectures packaged together, were led by associations of older people, who turned to universities in the search for tutors and infrastructure support. Subsequently, during the 1990s, some universities also started to offer degree courses aimed at older people. These programs have generally been designed as three or four-year versions of regular degrees, but tailored for older students. At present, around 50 private and public Spanish universities offer some type of education specifically for seniors (Orte, Ballester, & Touza, 2004).

However, research on university programs and their participants is not keeping up with the growing interest that university programs are showing in senior education and older learners. Apart from some studies that have sought to describe the typical profiles of participants or the main characteristics of the educational programs offered (e.g., Alfageme, 2007; Huang, 2005; Palmero & Jiménez, 2008), one of the issues that has raised research interest concerns the reasons for enrolling, perhaps because knowing the reasons and motivations that drive older learners to attend university programs would help to plan effectively programs that meet their needs. However, the number of studies that have examined older learners' motivations and, specifically, the reasons that account for their participation in U3A is still small, particularly when compared to the relatively larger number of studies devoted to the motivational orientations of adult learners in general (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Montoro, Pinazo, & Tortosa, 2007).

Most studies on motivation report a wide range of reasons to explain older people's participation in educational programs, and generally there is more than one reason why an older adult decides to attend educational activities and programs. Thus, part of the research effort has sought to group these reasons into categories and assess their importance or frequency according to older students.

For instance, Swindell (1993) and Jarvis and Walker (1997) classified the reasons for participating into two broad categories: "product orientation," which includes reasons related to knowledge acquisition such as interest in the subject, intellectual stimulation, or general self-development; and "person orientation," which is related to social contact factors such as making new friends, escaping boredom and routine, or enjoying the company of interesting people. These studies found that although both factors played a significant role, product

orientation motivations rated highest among the reasons cited for joining programs aimed at older people.

A similar and more widely used classification differentiates between expressive and instrumental motivations. Expressive motivations are restricted to the process of learning, and include learning for learning's sake, a cognitive interest in the subject, and feelings of satisfaction and self-development. In contrast, instrumental motivations are external reasons, located beyond the learning process and related to obtaining qualifications, meeting new people, making social contact, or using learned skills or information for solving problems. According to Adair and Mowesian (1993), whereas instrumental learning enables partici-pants to manage basic survival needs and maintain a sense of personal effectiveness, expressive learning satisfies needs and goals related to identity, affiliation, competence, and involvement in meaningful and purposeful activities.

Generally it has been assumed that learning among older adults is particularly guided by expressive motivations, more than by instru-mental ones. It is thought that once people retire, qualification and promotion pressures lose their motivational value. Furthermore, the sense of future time is shortened as people grow older. So external and frequently long-term goals associated with instrumental learning are comparatively less salient than the here-and-now satisfaction and enjoyment related to expressive learning. Such an explanation is consistent with similar goal changes that have been reported in other life domains as people get older (e.g., Brandtstädter, 2006).

Research seems to confirm these assumptions. For instance, cogni-tive interest in the subject, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to learn usually rank highest in the classification of motivations according to their relevance for older learners (Brady & Fowler, 1988; Jarvis & Walker, 1997; Mulenga & Liang, 2008; Scala, 1996), and they appear to be more important for older than for middle-aged students (O'Connor, 1987). Other important reasons stated by older adults are related to personal growth and the satisfaction drawn from the process of learning. For instance, Kim & Merriam (2004, p. 450) reported that to "learn just for the joy of learning," "satisfy an enquiring mind," or "seek knowledge for its own sake" were three of the five main reasons for enrolling in a Learning in Retirement Institute. In contrast, the same study found that reasons related to the reinforcement of family ties or to escape from difficult or unde-sired life situations were the least shared by older students.

This predominance of expressive motivations over instrumental ones does not mean that instrumental reasons are absent from the minds of older students. In particular, social relationships (making

new friends or socializing) have been regarded as important ingredients in education for older people (Mehrotra, 2003). Although research confirms its relevance (e.g., Kim & Merriam, 2004; Montoro et al., 2007; Villar, 2003), it seems that social contact is not the main motivation of older learners for attending educational programs. Similarly, Jamieson (2007) found that work and employment-related motivations were instrumental reasons that also had a significant presence among a sample of older students who graduated from regular (not addressed only to older learners) United Kingdom higher education institutions, this being particularly so among the younger (51–60 years) students. However, expressive motivations such as an interest in the subject or personal development were still the most frequently mentioned reasons, even in this particular sample and regardless of age.

Whatever the reasons for participating, some authors have also assumed that participation is closely linked to a certain view of oneself, and aspects such as identity, self-esteem, and self-confidence are thought to be involved in the decision to enroll in a formal learning course. O'Dowd (2005) and Purdie and Boulton-Lewis (2003) found that older students considered a certain level of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence in their own learning strengths to be necessary to enroll in formal courses. As well as self-related factors being important for involvement in learning processes in older age, this relationship could also be circular; involvement in courses might have an impact on self-related issues. For instance, Glanz (1997) argued that participating in an educational course, such as learning computing skills, had a positive impact on older learners' self-attributed status and prestige once they were able to overcome the fear of approaching something that might be perceived as too modern for them. In the case of university, this bidirectional effect might also be present. Its image as a formal institution, the cradle of knowledge and culture, could pose a barrier that only self-confident older people might overcome. At the same time, the prestige attached to university could be attractive for older students, who might find that attending university courses offers a source of self-esteem and personal meaning.

To sum up, the present study aims to examine the motivations that drive older people to attend university courses. Specifically, it seeks to determine the relative weight of different expressive and instrumental motivations that have been highlighted in the literature. Following Kim and Merriam (2004), a qualitative methodology was used to bring a deeper understanding of older students' motivations. This is an approach that allows the free expression and justification of motivations and goes beyond indicating a level of agreement with a set of reasons drawn up by the researcher and presented as a list of individual items.

METHOD

Sample

This study involved a purposeful sample of 36 U3A students (18 women and 18 men). Sample size was determined according to the need for a sufficient number of interviews to capture possible variations in views about the research issues.

The age of participants ranged from 58 to 85, with a mean of 68.2 years ($SD = 6.47$). Most participants were married (14) or widowed (12). The remainder were either separated (2) or had never been married (8). They all lived independently in their own homes. As regards their educational background, 11 participants had only completed primary studies, while 16 had attended high school or vocational studies. The remaining 11 participants had university studies. This distribution makes the educational level of the sample significantly higher than the 6.6% of older Spanish adults with university studies according to recent statistics (Instituto de Mayores y Servicios Sociales [IMSERSO], 2006).

Participants were drawn from university courses for older people run by the University of Barcelona. These courses involve a cycle of lectures (two or three times a week) given by academic tutors and using the infrastructure of the university (classrooms, teaching material, etc.). Each lecture focuses on a specific topic, and the whole course is structured across an academic year.

Instruments and Procedure

A semistructured interview was developed around questions referring to participants' educational experience, their motivations for attending university and, more specifically, their experience and assessment of the university course for older people that they were attending. The complete interview comprised 12 questions, but only responses to 2 questions were analyzed in the present study. These questions were the following: (a) What were the reasons that encouraged you to join the university course? What were your reasons? (b) What do you think is preventing people your age from joining a university course?

The first question aimed to describe the personal motivations of participants for joining a university program. In the second question, these participants had to reflect upon the barriers that other people might face in joining such a program.

Before being interviewed, participants read and signed a consent form. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and all

proper names and locations were removed from the transcription to ensure confidentiality.

Sections of transcriptions corresponding to answers to the target questions were then isolated and subjected to content analysis. The aim here was to identify key themes in the interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Transcripts were first read and reread by a team of three researchers, noting any recurring themes or ideas. Ideas were grouped and regrouped a number of times on the basis of similarities and differences. A code-scheme was developed that mirrored this thematic grouping, and transcripts were coded on the basis of these themes. During the process of data analysis, the members of the research team constantly checked the codes that were assigned to data segments. It is important to note that, depending on the ideas expressed, more than one code could be assigned to answers given by the same participant. However, the most frequent case was that only one theme or idea was found in the same answer.

Transcriptions and codes were subsequently given to a different two-researcher team, and their classification was compared to the original one. There were no major differences in coding, and any minor differences were resolved by discussion between teams.

RESULTS

Before mentioning specific reasons for attending the university program, most participants (22 out of 36) talked about events that had changed the course of their lives, disrupted their time and activity organization, and which had, as a result, triggered the decision to enroll in a course. These life events are the context that makes it easier to understand why some of the participants attend university courses. Furthermore, these events reinforce the notion of university courses as a kind of self-determined life rebuilding strategyas something that these participants have chosen in order to adapt to their new situation by developing new satisfactory routines.

Four of these triggering life events were found in the interviews: retirement (mentioned by 12 people, men and women), loss of spouse (8 people, 6 women, 2 men), empty nest (3 participants, all women), and leaving care giving tasks (1 woman). Some extracts that express these ideas are as follows:

> **After 45 years devoted to my pharmacy, a whole life, suddenly…
> suddenly you're free, and you need to think about how you're going
> to organise your own life. So, I heard about, I asked for…and some-
> body talked to me about the university. [Woman, aged 71]**

> We were a couple who went everywhere together, all day together. So, once he passed away . . . my life basically sank . . . at the beginning you get so bored, you don't know what to do, where to go . . . and then I discovered the university. If he had been here maybe I would never have even thought about it. [Woman, aged 65]

Although these life scenarios facilitate decisions, participants also tend to mention other reasons for attending university courses that generally go beyond life circumstances.

Reasons for Attending University Courses

Four main reasons were isolated from the transcripts. The first, which was mentioned by 16 out of 36 participants, is linked to the idea of remaining active and filling time in a positive way. Generally, after a normal life transition (such as those described above), university courses are chosen as an attractive way of allocating time. These responses emphasize the need to be involved in challenging activities in order to avoid stagnation, and they are coherent with the active ageing discourse:

> When you retire, if your body and mind are still healthy enough, you shouldn't let yourself go, neither your body nor your mind, because the two things are the same . . . if you ruin your mind, your body fails and you get really low. So I needed something that stimulated me a bit, that forced me to sharpen up, otherwise you are tempted to choose the most comfortable position, let's say, lying down on the sofa and watching TV . . . [Man, aged 63]

> The point is to spend your excess energy and, at the same time, do something that makes you feel alive, to keep you from . . . giving up on life . . . from fading away. [Man, aged 72]

A somewhat extreme version of this motivation, which takes the focus away from the learning process and, instead, emphasizes external benefits and escape from a problematic situation, is the mention of the therapeutic function that attending university courses might have. Such participation would provide resources and time for disconnecting from daily life difficulties. Four students mentioned this respite function as a reason for attending university courses, although they all attributed this motivation to fellow students rather than to themselves:

> A 79-year-old woman who sits near me, she has two intellectually handicapped daughters, and the university is a kind of escape. She

says that she's much better since she's been coming to the course, she comes here happy to forget for a few hours the conflicts with her daughters, all the sour moments she has to endure... [Man, aged 59]

Here there are people with serious family problems, and psychiatrists or psychologists have advised them to come so as to put the problems they have at home aside for some time... divorces, depression, loneliness, coming here is a kind of relief from these problems. [Woman, aged 63]

A third reason for attending university courses has more to do with an academic or knowledge-related motivation. This is mentioned by people who see the course as a way of compensating for a lack of education in previous life stages, as a new opportunity to return to interests or studies that were abandoned for many years due to work and family duties, or were never fulfilled since parents didn't encourage academic achievement—perhaps because of the pressure to work and earn money as soon as possible. Such situations were common in the post-Spanish civil war years, during which time today's older generations spent their youth. Eight interviewees mentioned this kind of reason:

We come here to know things that maybe because of work you have never dealt with, you come to do things that you have never done before, and now there is an open opportunity. Long working days are over, you know... [Man, aged 66]

When I was young nobody wanted to study... in the village where I was born we'd never even heard about universities, everybody was waiting to be old enough to go to the city, to find a job and start your own family. Studying was never a priority... and I always regretted... I always had something bubbling away inside me, a need to study, a need to learn, and now I have the time to fill this void, that's why I'm so happy this opportunity was given to me. [Man, 73 years]

Nine participants cited reasons related to the need to know more to personal growth and to learn for learning's sake. In contrast to the previous motivation, these older students did not identify matters pending or voids to be filled. They simply have an inner need to know that is not related to any external goal or utility value beyond the process of learning:

I'm hungry to learn... I've always had interests, I like people who explain things I don't know... I like to read, to explore, to discover... that's the motivation. [Woman, aged 73]

> Many people ask me: "At your age, why do you want to learn?" And I answer, "Look, if you need it to be explained, you're not going to understand it anyway." Others say, "Why are you learning French? Do you want to go to France?" And I laugh because the only reason is me, I want to learn for myself. [Man, aged 68]

Finally, reasons related to meeting new people, maintaining social contacts, or involvement in social activities appeared only marginally in the interviews. Only two participants mentioned this kind of reason, and in both cases it was not as a single reason but, rather, as a motivation on top of other ones:

> First of all, I attend university to make the most of my time, and then so as not to shut myself up at home, to breath fresh air and meet new people, to chat and comment, to be a bit more up to date. It really helps me a lot. [Woman, aged 66]

Reasons that Discourage People from Attending a University Course

As regards the reasons for not attending university courses, the data revealed two kinds of motivations. The first is related to internal attributions, or motivations associated with a personal decision or choice. The second motivation corresponds to external attributions in which the reasons are linked to barriers or contexts that do not support the decision to join the course.

As for the internal motivations, the most frequent statement concerned the absence of motivation or interest in learning. This attitude was sometimes related to pessimism or even a depressive mood, but it was also linked to personal traits such as stagnation, apathy, tiredness, or passivity. Twenty-two participants mentioned this kind of reason. Some examples are as follows:

> Many people do not want to get out from where they are. They are depressed and they don't see the good things life is offering you, whatever age you are. You need to go forward, otherwise you're done for, that's my attitude. [Woman, aged 73]

> Older people don't want to make sacrifices. They prefer to play cards, watch TV or have a coffee with their friends. But they don't have any other interests, they don't get involved with new things, they don't face new challenges or make efforts to get new things. Many of my friends,

unfortunately, are stuck in this stance of letting the days go by . . . and days really go by! [Woman, aged 82]

Another internal motivation, which appeared in eight responses, is not to do with limited intellectual interests or passivity. Rather, it has to do with being wary of participating in learning activities, i.e., an insecurity and lack of self-confidence that prevents people from joining university courses.

> **Maybe some people feel embarrassed, or they think someone will speak to them in front of all the class and they may become an object of ridicule. But that's not the case, you come to listen and you talk only if you want to or if you have a question. [Woman, aged 65]**

> **I think it's because they're afraid. It's the fear of failing, of not measuring up. They think they're not going to understand anything, that learning is impossible at their age. They think that university is too much for them. And I say: "That's nonsense!" [Man, aged 62]**

Apart from these internal motivations, other participants also mention external reasons that could be a barrier to enrolling in university courses. The most frequent one is lack of information, a reason that appears in 14 interviews. According to these participants, little effort and few resources are devoted to publicizing university courses, so many potentially interested older people do not even know that they exist:

> **They don't come because they don't know about it. Unless you know someone who attends the courses, you might have no idea about universities for older people. There are no press articles, there's no advertising, no flyers in key places where older people usually go . . . It really is a pity. [Woman, aged 59]**

As well as lack of information some older people are thought to have duties that prevent them from investing time in university courses. This idea of busy older people is mentioned by six participants who allude specifically to caring for grandchildren as a very time-consuming task:

> **Nowadays there are many grandmothers who are surrogate parents for their grandchildren . . . they have to take care of them while their own children are working, so they don't have much spare time to come here . . . I think they're more domestically tied up than is believed. [Man, aged 66]**

> Because older couples are very busy! They have to take care of grand-children! A full 8-hour working day until the parents come back! And they sacrifice leisure activities and time devoted to themselves . . . Maybe it's unfair, but it's very common, that's how we are . . . family counts so much! [Man, aged 70]

Finally, illness and health problems were also mentioned in some responses. Three participants highlighted this factor as an important reason to explain why some older people do not attend courses:

> I think that most of them, due to problems . . . I suppose that to join university courses you need to be healthy, because if you're in bad health, if you are frail, attending university does not even cross your mind . . . [Woman, aged 67]

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to examine the reasons for participating in university courses aimed at older people.

The motivations expressed by the sample tend to be more expressive than instrumental, at least according to the definition of these categories used by previous research. Indeed, motivations that prototypically have been considered as instrumental appeared relatively few times among participants' answers. For instance, none of them mentioned reasons related to work, employment, or qualifications. Even social contact, the most frequent instrumental motivation highlighted by previous studies, was rarely cited by our interviewees. In fact, they did not identify social reasons as being particularly important for enrolling in university programs, and neither was lack of support from family and friends proposed as a barrier. This finding could mean that social contact is more a benefit that results from attending a course (and sometimes a nonexpected benefit) rather than a reason that drives the decision to attend in the first place. Perhaps the clearest instrumental motivation that appeared in the responses was related to the therapeutic function that a few participants attributed to the course. This motivation goes well beyond the learning process or any educational aim the course may have. However, it should be noted that such therapeutic reasons were attributed to other people, not to oneself.

In contrast, and even if triggered by an external event that frames and gives context to the decision, many of the motivations stated by participants tended to be intrinsic and linked to goals related to the

learning process. Personal growth or compensating for a lack of educational opportunities fit neatly into this type of motivation. Thus, reasons related to a here-and-now satisfaction drawn from learning and being part of a significant activity are very important in our sample. This is consistent with previous findings (Brady & Fowler, 1988; Jarvis & Walker, 1997; Scala, 1996).

However, a more detailed examination of responses suggests that the conclusions drawn may not be so straightforward. For instance, it is noteworthy how many responses seem to be designed to give a positive view of oneself. Indeed, almost half the participants alluded to remaining active as the main reason for joining university courses. Involvement in these courses keeps their mind sharp, makes them feel alive, and counters images of decline, passivity, and stagnation which are stereotypically associated with ageing and older people (Nelson, 2005). This effect is reinforced when the participants talk about people who do not go to university courses. In most responses, lack of motivation, laziness, pessimism, and the traditionally negative views of older people are identified as one of the main causes of not attending courses. At the same time, the interviewees, as current university students, locate themselves at a safe distance from these reasons and images.

Therefore, in addition to providing an example of how the active ageing discourse is present in political and scientific forums—as well as being rooted in everyday language and shared by older people— the responses underline the effect that participation in university courses might have on the self; helping to maintain it in positive terms. However, one might wonder if this kind of goal is actually an extrinsic motivation for attending learning courses rather than an intrinsic one, since it lies outside the process of learning and has little to do with learning for learning's sake or even with personal growth. Indeed, it seems to have more to do with an external objective: taking a positive stance with respect to oneself.

The instrumentality of these motivations seems to have the function of emotion regulation. This contrasts with the usual instrumental reasons, focused on acquiring ready-to-use skills or qualifications, which are virtually absent from the responses of participants. These results provide food for thought as regards the kind of educational opportunities for older people that are being offered and which should be offered. While joining a course for the sake of learning or to remain active and maintain a positive self-image are clearly valuable reasons that should always be taken into account, one might ask whether a more capacity-building orientation is needed in education for older people. Such an approach to education would interest

old people for the fun of it as well as to obtain useful skills. Not only would such an approach be more in tune with the policy guidelines established by the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing (Sidorenko & Walker, 2004). It would also enhance the value of ageing as a developmental process and of older people as a resource in themselves rather than simply a target of resources. Of course, being satisfied is important in the learning process, but it would be even more relevant were it to be combined with the possibility of developing or reinforcing skills that enable older people to contribute to their families and communities. The leap from successful ageing—defined in terms of wellbeing, adaptation or health (e.g., Baltes & Baltes, 1990)—to a more inclusive and ambitious notion of ageing termed ''generative ageing''—defined in terms of everyday contributions to new generations and to society as a whole (Warburton & Gooch, 2007; Warburton, McLaughlin, & Pinsker, 2006)—can only be made through education and training. And it implies an optimistic view of the ageing process, one in which ''old dogs'' (or at least most of them) can, if they wish, really learn useful new tricks.

The results also suggest certain strategies that could be followed in order to develop a successful course aimed at older people. For example, the participants gave particular importance to information and course promotion. According to many of them, older people do not enroll in university courses simply because they do not know they exist. This aspect, in addition to not assuming that older people have no other obligations, is highlighted by our participants and should be taken into account by course organizers.

Finally, there are several limitations to the study that need to be addressed in future research. Firstly, we are aware that the present study has been conducted with a somewhat privileged and small group: those motivated enough to join a university program. As such, their reasons for participating might say little about the fears, lack of opportunities, or barriers that prevent most older people from attending not only universities but also other formal or informal learning experiences. In the same vein, our study did not address the issue of diversity in the population of older people and how learning motivations and perceived barriers might vary according to a range of factors. Particular groups, such as older people with a diverse educational background, different ethnic groups, or older people living in rural as opposed to urban areas might report particular learning motivations and barriers due to their idiosyncratic experiences and circumstances. Thus, when designing programs to meet the learning needs of older people, it is important to recognize the diversity of users in terms of personal background, life experience,

and current geographic location. Only if this complexity is addressed
will university programs be inclusive enough, thus avoiding the risk
that they become a kind of exclusive club for privileged groups.

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