MOTIVES, PERSONAL GOALS, AND LIFE SATISFACTION IN OLD AGE

First Results from the Munich Twin Study (GOLD)

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Becoming old and reaching retirement has been described as a life task (Havighurst, 1960, 1972; Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976) in which occupational involvement has to be replaced with other purposive activities. Retired people can no longer derive satisfaction from occupational pursuits or raising a family, they have to find new ways to lead rewarding lives (cf. Rapkin & Fischer, 1992).

Life satisfaction in elderly people, of course, is a multivariate phenomenon and is influenced – as is proven by many studies (e.g., Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Hooker & Siegler, 1993; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1974) – by an array of various factors: There are external influences such as socioeconomic status, financial adequacy, etc., but also more personal or “psychological” factors like, for example, perceived health status, vitality, extraversion or, as shown in a recent study by Harlow and Cantor (1996), participation in culturally valued tasks, e.g., community services and social life participation (see also Diener & Suh, 1998).

Figure 1 depicts the network of variables we were investigating in the present study. The main dependent variable was life satisfaction and subjective well-being in old age, and our main assumptions were motivational. Is there an independent contribution of motivational determinants in explaining life satisfaction – above all the aforementioned influences? Do motivational explanations also hold true for older, retired adults, in whom motive dispositions, especially for achievement or power, possibly do not play that role anymore (McClelland, Sciole, & Weaver, 1998; Veroff, Depner, Kulka, & Douvan, 1980), and personal goals are to be changed from occupational toward social or leisure pursuits (Harlow & Cantor, 1996)?
In a recent study, for example, Jacob and Guarnaccia (1997) correlated need for achievement and need for affiliation with life satisfaction in elderly individuals. Based on only moderate correlations they concluded that possibly motivational determinants become less important to well-being in elderly people. For us, this conclusion is not very convincing. Of course, an age-related decline in motive dispositions could take place, and, before going deeper, analyses often start with simple correlations. However, why should motive dispositions have an influence on life satisfaction per se? For a motivational analysis other variables, like opportunity structures, situational incentives, etc. have additionally to be taken into account.

The core variables we propose to have an effect on life satisfaction and emotional well-being are: (1) motives, (2) personal goals and (3) experiences in daily life. In a very global way it is stated that life satisfaction and well-being in old age is, in part, a function of the degree to which the persons’ motives, personal goals, and everyday activities are matched. In other words, the more the persons’ activities are suited to fulfill their motives and their goals, the higher life satisfaction should be. This general congruency assumption is indicated in Figure 1 by the dotted connecting lines. However, the issue is complicated by the fact that the separate pieces in the network are not independent from each other, and – in addition – are influenced by various external variables outside the described network, as is indicated by the arrow-lines.

The Motive box is split into two small boxes, one for “implicit” and one for “self-attributed” motives. This differentiation dates back to the very beginnings of