

Ageing: A Disruptive Phenomenon

Short Communication

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In recent years, aging has evolved from a simple fact of life to an increasingly important life event. For many centuries, it marked a stage corresponding to the later years of life during which elderly people progressively lost their social position. Once economically and socially active members of society, they now became “useless” because of their age, even representing a burden to be cared for. In some cultures, elderly people nevertheless acquired a special status because they allowed others to benefit from their experience or wisdom. With the evolution of traditional societies and the growing importance of economic aspects in today’s world, the status of wise elders, previously venerated, is becoming rare, even tending to disappear at the expense of economic aspects that weigh heavily on social relations. The technological and scientific progress of the modern era drastically improved living conditions such as the health of the population. This consequently increased life expectancy around the world, which varied according to sex and especially the economic level of the country. This population growth nevertheless influenced statistics, leading to the emergence of two new age groups: the third and fourth ages. In developed countries, this evolution resulted in a new social model, culminating in the acquisition of new rights such as health coverage. However, the most remarkable gain remains the right to retirement and pension benefits, which make retirement a truly enviable life, as everyone dreams of earning money without working.

After long being invisible members of society, in just a few decades, the elderly have become an envied and courted population. They have also become a precious resource. For example, retirees frequently contribute to childcare, whether with their own grandchildren or the children of others. They thus fill the gaps in the childcare system by looking after children of all ages. With free time on their hands, this population turns toward the world of leisure and social activities to fill their time. Far from living in idleness, retirees, who are often in good physical condition, frequently become involved in the nonprofit sector, participating in cultural, sports, or social activities or engaging in voluntary work. In countries like France, it is indeed retirees who run the majority of non-profit organizations and clubs. This elderly population has thus become a target for the economy of leisure, as their boundless free time allows them to take part in many activities that they were unable to do during their working lives for want of time or means. This sector, just like travel for retired tourists, constitutes a real market, thus making seniors a flourishing economic niche, which, in parallel, creates employment for many young people. This situation

nevertheless remains specific to economically advanced countries. In other countries, even if the elderly are entitled to retirement, their pensions may be insufficient to cover their daily needs, often forcing them to find paid work to live decently.

Feeling in good shape and with a new outlook on life, many seniors feel the need to start new relationships, even romantic ones. This urge to begin a new phase of life is often surprising to their children. Despite the resistance of society, this trend is progressively gaining ground. Why should romantic relationships be limited to people of a certain age group? It is thus important to consider the union of two people not only in terms of reproduction based on physical appearance and sex, which goes beyond the traditional barriers rooted in longstanding customs and traditions. Although society is gradually accepting the fact that the elderly can rebuild their lives, intergenerational relationships still face resistance. However, it is expected that this opposition will diminish over time. This new reality of seniors actively taking part in society is a recent societal trend that should be recognized by the broader population. For example, retirees can contribute to the transmission or sharing of their experience via tutoring or mentoring. They can even work one day a week to compensate for the decline in their income. In the field of health, population aging has led to the emergence of new specialties such as geriatrics or gerontology, not to mention the thriving care sector and especially nursing homes for the elderly. However, the use of nursing homes depends heavily on the revenues of these individuals, even in wealthy countries, and children are often called on to contribute financially to the care of their parents. It is time to initiate a real political debate on this issue to ensure that vulnerable people of the fourth age do not fall into the hands of slumlords. In countries without affordable care facilities, as in the case of China or India, an alternative solution currently being proposed is the development of domestic robots to care for the elderly, which constitutes a promising field of investigation. Even though this robotic solution may not be appropriate for everybody, the care sector offers growing job opportunities for young people.

Aging is now emerging as its own field of scientific research. Many research teams around the world are exploring this phenomenon, once thought to be merely a stage of gradual decline ending in death. This emerging field of study is already providing substantial insights into the area of adaptation. In this respect, cerebral plasticity, like biological, emotional, and cognitive flexibility, serves as a valuable source of knowledge and provides interesting avenues for experimental work. Research on age-related pathologies, notably neurodegenerative



diseases, has also encouraged researchers to more accurately define the characteristics of normal aging. With my colleagues*, I previously studied the impact of physical activity on the maintenance of cognitive functions in elderly individuals. Participants with mild cognitive impairment or early-stage Alzheimer's disease were divided into three groups: the first performed a pedaling exercise on an ergocycle, the second undertook cognitive exercises while pedaling, while the control group read for 20minutes. The exercise was repeated twice weekly for a duration of 8weeks. The physical activity intensity was fixed at 60% of the maximum heart rate at the end of a 6minute walking test. Impact was measured using attention, problem-solving, and working memory tests at five time points: at study inclusion, immediately after the first session, after 4 and 8weeks, and then after a 4week pause. Results highlighted the benefits of physical activity, especially when combined with cognitive tasks. Neuropsychological scores improved at the end of the 8 weeks, and even after the 4week pause, the improvement in cognitive performance remained stable and unchanged. This cognitive improvement appears to be associated with improved cerebral oxygenation, facilitated by the increased blood flow during physical activity. Our study therefore demonstrated that in patients with a pathology like Alzheimer's disease, which is considered to lead to irreversible cognitive decline, physical activity exerts a positive influence on their cognitive performances [1-5].

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