VOLUME 6

RIAGE
REVISTA IBERO-AMERICANA DE GERONTOLOGIA

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR OLDER ADULTS: BETWEEN "NO NEED" AND "NO TIME"?

Susana Silva
ORCID: 0000-0003-2240-1828

Vasiliki Folia
ORCID: 0000-0002-2159-7032

Informação do artigo
Recebido: 30/09/2024
Revisto: 31/10/2024
Aceite: 30/11/2024

ABSTRACT

Having control over one's life and an active role in society, or seeing oneself as a valuable community member, are examples of what it means to be empowered. Social interaction is, thus, both an antecedent and a consequence of empowerment. In Western societies, an emerging awareness that aging has become associated with a loss of empowerment has motivated efforts to better address this necessity in older adults. In this context, we created an innovative cognitive stimulation tool, where exercises are created by the users themselves as an alternative form of stimulation. After a period of intense dissemination in geriatric institutions, we encountered lower-than-expected levels of engagement. To understand whether this could be due to lack of material and human resources and/or lack of awareness regarding empowerment needs, we carried out semi-structured interviews with older adults and coordinating technicians in institutions. We found evidence that supported both a scenario of scarce institutional resources ("no time") and a lack of awareness of empowerment needs, especially among older adults ("no need"). We discuss potential ways to help change this scenario.

Key Words: Aging; Empowerment; Social interaction; Social change; Cognitive stimulation.

INTRODUCTION

Feeling empowered involves having control over one's own life within dynamic social contexts (Noordink et al., 2024) , which implies the ability to understand one's motivations and challenges, express oneself, being proactive and align personal aspirations with external resources, while maintaining flexibility (Tsubouchi et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023) . Empowered older adults have a sense of purpose (Van Regenmortel, & De Witte, 2023; Wu 2023) and a desire to share and feel appreciated by those around them (Machado, & Laffin, 2022) . They stay connected with others, actively seek and provide help, and recognize other people's merits (Pereira, 2020). Social interaction is, thus, inherent - both antecedent and consequent - to empowerment. Upon this interaction individuals build confidence, since the shared experiences, the exchange of ideas and sense of support reinforce a sense of self-efficacy. individuals who feel empowered, in turn, are more likely to engage in the community. This cyclical relationship underscores the interdependence between personal and social life.

Research has shown that promoting older adults' empowerment has numerous benefits, including improvements in self-efficacy (Maidment & Macfarlane, 2011; Akgül Gök et al., 2023), well-being (Fisher & Gosselink 2008), and quality of life (Tu et al., 2006). It also enhances the success of health interventions (Chan, 2012; Sak et al., 2017; Shearer, et al., 2012). The positive impact of empowering older adults extends beyond individuals themselves, influencing the effectiveness of caregivers' work (Melander-Wikman et al., 2006) and contributing to the success of age-friendly communities (Chao & Chen, 2017; Vongchavalitkul, 2015).This empowerment fosters an environment where older adults can maintain independence, actively participate in decision-making (for example related to managing their own health issues) and a sense of purpose in their daily lives.

Becoming empowered requires both individual- and group-level transformations, which have been increasingly addressed within intervention programs. At the individual level, the literature shows interventions that aim to improve skills such as financial and logistical planning (Spira, 2006), enhance reflection and self-awareness, foster effective communication and expression (Antonietti, 2014), and develop critical decision-making abilities (Niyomdecha, & Noklang, 2024). On the group level, numerous studies highlighted the importance of transformations within the family (Rabiei, 2013), caregiving institutions (Pereira Osorio, 2020), community and society in general (Inaba, 2016). A growing focus among researchers and policymakers is the need to identify and leverage the strengths of older adults (Dong, & Dong, 2018; Rojas & Pino, 2018), provide them with ongoing learning opportunities, and fully utilize their skills and capabilities (Soong, 2020) to ensure they remain active and engaged contributors to society.

Empowering policies and practices are relatively new and may be perceived as more or less disruptive in Western countries, where an assistive, health, and security-focused paradigm is still pervasive (Kam, 1996). With this in mind, we developed a tool aimed at promoting social interaction and empowerment by leveraging existing practices. Specifically, we created a cost-free online platform, "Question club" (www.clubedasquestoes.pt), for cognitive stimulation - a field traditionally associated with health - where participants were invited not only to solve semantic exercises, but also to create their own exercises for other participants to solve. Participants were provided with step-by-step instructions to guide them throughout the creation process, but they were always requested to work

on topics of personal interest (person-centered semantics, see Folia & Silva, 2024). By incorporating this “contribute” mode alongside the traditional “play” mode, we sought to shift the focus from passive exercise to active knowledge sharing, and from learner to teacher roles, ultimately highlighting older adults’ strengths, productivity and social contributions. To further enhance the social interaction component, we integrated an internal social network into the platform, accessible only to registered users. The self-managed nature of this network would highlight users’ autonomy in choosing their communication partners, reinforcing the self-determination inherent to empowerment.

After one year of actively promoting the platform in Portuguese nursing homes, day and community centers, as well as senior universities, users’ engagement remained significantly lower than expected. This outcome was surprising for several reasons: the platform was offered for free; a paper - and - pen version was available for those without access to computers; institutions responded very positively during initial outreach; we conducted live demonstrations (group quiz format sessions in the institutions), which seemed to yield good results; and we maintained regular contact with institutions to provide ongoing support. Moreover, the platform's usability had been tested in a previous, play-only format, with satisfactory outcomes (Batista et al., 2024). Given these factors, the low level of engagement was unexpected.

One plausible explanation for the observed issue could be the shortage of material (equipment, facilities) or human resources to implement the activities in these institutional contexts. Another possibility might not lie with the activity itself but rather with the lack of older adults’ and/or staff awareness of empowerment as a necessity of aging individuals. .

To gain preliminary insights into the validity of these hypotheses, we carried out semi-structured interviews with institutionalized older adults (n = 5) and technicians (coordinating staff, n = 3). Using an implicit approach, we tried to assess awareness of the empowerment needs of aging individuals, applying different methods for each group. Given that social interaction is inherent to empowerment, and because we embedded an experimental social network in our cognitive stimulation platform, we also considered social interaction needs. To investigate whether the low levels of engagement with our cognitive stimulation tool could relate to the scarcity of material and human resources in the institution, we asked technicians to speak about potential obstacles to the implementation of new activities.

METHODS

Participants

We invited five cognitively functional older adults (2 men, 3 women) who had been previously identified by the technicians as individuals potentially interested in participating in conversations. All agreed to take part. Two of the participants resided in a care facility and had mid-to-high socioeconomic status (SES), while the other three attended a day center and had mid-to-low SES. Their ages ranged from 65 to 93. The institutions were located in the metropolitan area of Porto, Portugal.

The three technicians involved were all women (ages between 30 and 50 years) who held coordinating roles within the institutions and worked closely with the older adults. One technician coordinated the activities at a residential care unit, while the other two oversaw day centers. Two of them worked at the institutions attended by the older participants.

Instruments

We developed two reference interview-scripts, one for older adults attending institutional settings, and another for technicians. These reference scripts were designed to encourage participants to share their views on empowerment and social interaction as potential needs, without directly asking about them.

For older adults, we posed two main questions, framed as requests for participants' opinions. The first focused on the positive and negative aspects of aging, while the second explored potential ways to improve older adults' lives. While both questions aimed to elicit reflections on participants' priority needs, the second question specifically sought to uncover possible solutions. When the topics of social interaction and empowerment were not spontaneously mentioned, the interviewer subtly steered the conversation towards these topics.

In the interviews with technicians, the key questions concerned (1) the priority goals of the institution and (2) the challenges they encountered in implementing new projects. To avoid eliciting socially desirable responses, the interviewer refrained from steering the conversation toward the topics of interest (empowerment and social interaction) unless these topics were introduced by the technicians themselves. In a similar vein, we always referred to "new activities" instead of focusing on our own project.

Procedure

We conducted in-person interviews with older adults at their respective institutions and held zoom sessions with technicians. Prior to the interview, all participants provided written informed consent in accordance with the declaration of Helsinki.

Analysis

Interviews were first transcribed and subsequently analyzed. In older adults' interviews, we looked for contents that might indicate whether social interaction and empowerment were perceived as personal needs, and the extent to which these were fulfilled. In technicians' data, we examined whether addressing those needs in older adults was viewed as a priority. To investigate whether the low investment in empowering tools such as our platform could be due to lack of resources, we examined the obstacles they mentioned when speaking about new activities.

RESULTS

Older adults and their needs

Table 1 presents illustrative statements of older adults' explicit and implicit concerns with social interaction and empowerment in their lives. Though non-elicited, the topic of family support (emotional and/or logistical) emerged recurrently as a concern, suggesting that it is an important (unfulfilled) necessity that may overrule the others. Therefore, we added this topic in the analysis.

Participants made no spontaneous remarks about the importance of social interaction to them. When prompted to do so, they expressed no major concerns regarding its absence, with one participant (P3) even explicitly stating a preference for being on her own.

Concerning empowerment, participants' comments pointed to few or no personal aspirations (P1), low levels of self-determination (P4), discomfort with speaking up (P2), or very limited views of what it means to be "valued" (P3, who mentioned feeling valued for her appearance but complained about her children being absent). The youngest (male) participant (P5) was an exception, in that he expressed an explicit concern

for self-determination and a proactive attitude towards his aspirations.

Table 1- Statements in older adults’ discourse that illustrate their needs and concerns

	Social Interaction	Empowerment	Family support
Residential care unit, mid-high SES			
P1, 80+ Man	*Interacting is healthy. I did it a lot while I was working.*	*At my age, I can only expect to be cherished and do my crosswords. I miss working.*	*I understand that my son is busy and cannot pay me assistance.*
P2, 90+ Woman	*Yes, I like to talk.*	[speaks up for the right to call her sons, but not for the quality of food]	[very close relationship with descendants]
Day center, mid-low SES			
P3, 80+ Woman	*I prefer my own company most of the time.*	*My children value me: they say I look good for my age.*	*None of my children comes to visit me and they live nearby.*
P4, 80+ Woman	*Yes, I like to talk.*	*My daughter does not allow me to go out on the street on my own. I wish I could go out more often.*	*My youngest daughter is the one who takes care of me.*
P5. 60+ Man	*I want a girlfriend.*	*I will take orders from my son only when I am dead. I want to find my ex-girlfriend,*	*My son is unable to pay me assistance due to his work. I understand.*

Note. P = participant; SES = socioeconomic status

Regarding the emergent topic of family support, all participants except one highlighted the limited presence of some (P4) or all of their descendants (P1, P3, P5) in their lives. Among these, two participants (P1 and P5, both male) expressed their understanding of the situation.

Technicians’ priorities and obstacles to innovation

As shown in Table 2, the list of priority goals differed across the three institutions. Social interaction was mentioned by P2 and P3, but not by P1. Only P3 referred to empowerment-related goals, such as self-determination (users engaging only in what they feel like doing) and connection with the community (e.g., attending community events). Other priorities included basic needs like food and medication (P1 and P3) or needs related to esteem and affection (P2).

Table 2 - Topics highlighted by coordinating technicians regarding their priority goals and perceived obstacles to innovation in the institution

	Priorities	Obstacles to innovation (new activities)
P1 Residential care	Hygiene, food Routines (scheduled activities)	Routines, more than change, are necessary to them
P2 Day centre	Social interaction Feel cherished	Shortage of material (e.g., vehicles for transportation) and human resources (staff) Overflow of third-party, cost-free activities limits available time
P3 Day centre	Logistic support Social interaction Self-determination and connection with the community (empowerment)	Large and heterogeneous group vs. available facilities (all in same room) and human resources

Note. P = participant;

When asked about perceived obstacles to new activities, limitations in material and human resources were mentioned by P2 and P3. Time limitations were also pointed out (P2) because of the abundant external offer of activities, sponsored by the city council and implemented by external monitors. The importance of routines (vs. change) for the cognitive health of residential care clients was pointed out by P1 – not exactly as an obstacle, but rather as a refrainer of innovation.

DISCUSSION

Our goal was to gain preliminary insights into the reasons for the low engagement of institutionalized older adults with our cognitive stimulation platform, designed to promote social interaction and empowerment. We considered two hypothetical explanations - the lack of material and human resources in the institutions, and low awareness of social interaction and empowerment as high-level necessities of older adults. To that end, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a small sample of older adults and a group of technicians responsible for the design and implementation of activities at their institutions.

The interviews with technicians supported the idea that available resources - material, human and time itself - are major obstacles to the implementation of new activities, less so when there is no external aid. Along with this, the importance of adhering to routines, i.e., implementing a given activity always at the same day each week, was mentioned as a reason to deliberately minimize the potential disruption caused by introducing novel activities.

Concerning the awareness that social interaction and empowerment are necessities of older adults that need to be fulfilled, different scenarios emerged in the two groups. Social interaction was acknowledged as a priority by two out of three interviewees, and one was explicit about the need to promote self-determination and community bonds as empowerment components. In contrast, older adults were less concerned with increasing their social interactions, and their awareness of empowerment needs was very low. Participants seemed to normalize the idea that they can no longer aspire or challenge the opinions and directives of institutional agents or even their children. Given that social interaction can help foster empowerment, older adults' low interest in both probably amplifies the self-normalization of powerlessness. In sum, while the technician's message could be interpreted as "we have no time for your platform", the older adults might be saying something more akin to "I have no need to create exercises for your platform or meet new people".

In contrast to these apparently self-neglected needs, older adults seemed highly focused on the level of support they received (or did not receive) from their family, namely from their children. This was reinforced by technicians, who emphasized their role as providers of emotional support (sometimes replacing their children, P2), or explicitly mentioned that the successful integration of the individual into residential care is totally dependent on family support (P1). One way to understand this scenario is by thinking of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), wherein self-actualization and self-esteem (elements of empowerment) depend partly on receiving sufficient love from others. Perhaps, and for cultural reasons, our participants view the family circle as the main, if not the sole, source of love. Without love from their family, they probably feel there is no love at all.

As a preliminary approach, our study has several limitations: the sample size was small and relatively homogenous (from urban and suburban

areas), and the analysis was loosely structured. In addition, the fact that all participants were institutionalized may have introduced bias into the results - namely when it comes to their levels of satisfaction with social interaction.

Despite these limitations, we ended up with several insights for future investigations of aging-related empowerment. The (1) modulating factors of successful empowerment - this including awareness of this need as well as effective action - are an important topic. The heterogeneous discourse of the technicians on this matter suggests that part-time institutionalization (such as day centers) may be more favorable to empowerment, but also that the professional or psychological profile of the person plays a role. Gender may also have an influence, as a greater need for empowerment (and consequent motivation to work on it) could still persist among older men in current generations of older adults. Another topic raised by our study concerns the (2) importance of family support to older adults: while it seems crucial, at the same time, deficits in this area are not easily addressed by external interventions. Thus, one potential solution to the negative effects of low family support would be promoting older adults’ ability to search for alternative sources of logistical and emotional support in the community.

Regarding the lack of institutional resources and the consequent prioritization of basic, low-level needs over high-level ones such as empowerment, this is a societal challenge that can hardly be solved through individual or small-group interventions. Nevertheless, if we are able to persuade policy makers that the low-level needs of older adults like health and security become easier to address when they feel more empowered, we will be taking an important step further.

CONCLUSION

Awareness of aging-related empowerment needs seems to be gradually emerging within institutions from Portuguese metropolitan areas. However, older citizens seem to lag behind this movement. Institutions may require incentives to push this forward, since the current burdens placed upon them seems to leave little room for exploration and change.

REFERENCES

Akgül Gök, F., Yazgan, E. Ö., Albayrak, G., & Cagliyan Turk, A. (2023). The Effect of Empowerment Interventions Applied to Geriatric Patients Receiving Physical Therapy on Their Depression and Self-Efficacy Levels. Social Work in Public Health, 38(3), 209-220. https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2022.2118924

Antonietti, A., Balconi, M., Catellani, P., & Marchetti, A. (2014). Empowering skills for an active ageing and healthy living. In Active ageing and healthy living (pp. 157-171). IOS Press.

Batista, A. R.; Folia, V.; Silva, S. Semantic Training for Cognitive Stimulation in Healthy Aging: Motives, Dimensions, and Usability of the CerUp Online Platform. Preprints 2024, 2024060379. https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202406.0379.v1

Chan, W., Woo, J., & Hui, E. (2012). The role of empowerment in the management of chronic diseases in the elderly. In Aging in Hong Kong: A Comparative Perspective (pp. 183-210). Boston, MA: Springer US.

Chao, T. Y. S., & Chen, H. L. (2017). From Isolation to Inclusion: The Importance of Empowerment in Planning Age-Friendly Communities. In Planning for Greying Cities (pp. 128-142). Routledge.

Fisher, B. J., & Gosselink, C. A. (2008). Enhancing the efficacy and empowerment of older adults through group formation. Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 51(1-2), 2–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634370801967513

Folia, V.; Silva, S. Tailoring Semantic Interventions for Older Adults: Task-Focused and Person-Centered Approaches. Brain Sci. 2024, 14, 907. https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci14090907

Inaba, M. (2016). Aging and elder care in Japan: a call for empowerment-oriented community development. Journal of gerontological social work, 59(7-8), 587-603. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2016.1258023

Kam, P.-K. (1996). Empowering Elderly People: A Community Work Approach. Community Development Journal, 31(3), 230–240. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44257279

Machado, C. C. D. A. C., & Laffin, M. H. L. F. (2022). The relationship between knowledge and empowerment of elderly people in schooling processes. Educar em Revista, 38, e82053. http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0104-4060.82053

Maidment, J., & Macfarlane, S. (2011). Crafting communities: Promoting inclusion, empowerment, and learning between older women. Australian Social Work, 64(3), 283-298. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2010.520087

Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review. 50(4) doi:10.1037/h0054346

Melander-Wikman, A., Jansson, M., & Ghaye, T. (2006). Reflections on an appreciative approach to empowering elderly people, in home healthcare. Reflective Practice, 7(4), 423-444.

https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940600986991

Noordink, T., Verharen, L., Schalk, R., & Van Regenmortel, T. (2024). A Conceptual Exploration of Psychological Empowerment with Older People. A Tailored Concept Mapping Approach. Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2024.2359927

Niyomdecha, A., & Noklang, S. (2024). Using of Action Learning Approach on Self-Empowerment of the Elderly. Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental, 18(6), e05218-e05218. https://doi.org/10.24857/rgsa.v18n6-003

Pereira Osorio, C. (2020). The Power of Empowering: An Inclusive and Evidence-Based Intervention for Long-Term Residential Care.

Rabiei, L., Mostafavi, F., Masoudi, R., & Hassanzadeh, A. (2013). The effect of family-based intervention on empowerment of the elders. Journal of education and health promotion, 2(1), 24. https://doi.org/10.4103/2277-9531.112700

Sak, G., Rothenfluh, F., & Schulz, P. J. (2017). Assessing the predictive power of psychological empowerment and health literacy for older patients’ participation in health care: a cross-sectional population-based study. BMC geriatrics, 17, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-017-0448-x

Shearer, N. B., Fleury, J., Ward, K. A., & O’Brien, A. M. (2012). Empowerment interventions for older adults. Western journal of nursing research, 34(1), 24-51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945910377887

Soong, J. J. (2020). Empowering the elderly to promote active ageing in the labour market: a new strategic scheme to improve ageing human resource and to solve shortage of labour force in taiwan. Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics & Strategy, 47(1).

Spira, M. (2006). Mapping your future—a proactive approach to aging. Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 47(1-2), 71-87. https://doi.org/10.1300/J083v47n01_06

Tsubouchi, Y., Yorozuya, K., Tainosyo, A. et al. A conceptual analysis of older adults’ empowerment in contemporary japanese culture. BMC

Geriatr 21, 672 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-021-02631-x

Tu, Y. C., Wang, R. H., & Yeh, S. H. (2006). Relationship between perceived empowerment care and quality of life among elderly residents within nursing homes in Taiwan: a questionnaire survey. International journal of nursing studies, 43(6), 673–680. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2005.10.003

Zhang, S., Li, J., Zou, J., Ai, Y., Qin, S., Xiao, X., ... & Wang, Y. (2023). Empowerment of the older adults in the context of Chinese culture: an evolutionary concept analysis. Frontiers in Psychology, 14, 1271315. Zhang, S., Li, J., Zou, J., Ai, Y., Qin, S., Xiao, X., ... & Wang, Y. (2023). Empowerment of the older adults in the context of Chinese culture: an evolutionary concept analysis. Frontiers in Psychology, 14, 1271315.

Van Regenmortel, T., & De Witte, J. (2023). An empowerment perspective on older persons: The power of resilience. Silver Empowerment Fostering Strengths and Connections for an Age-Friendly Society, 19.

Vongchavalitkul, B. (2015). Using empowerment theory in health promotion guided development the home for the elderly in Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand. The Business & Management Review, 6(4), 103.

Wu, X. (2022). Community-based later life learning in China: From the perspective of empowerment. Studies in the Education of Adults, 54(1), 84-110. https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2021.2020957