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Beyond Stereotypes: Talent, Resources and Social Activity among the Postmodern Elderly

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Beyond Stereotypes: Talent, Resources and Social Activity among the Postmodern Elderly

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Abstract

Desirable proposals in terms of active ageing are constrained by the heterogeneous conditions of elderly people, often affected by inequalities and social frailty. Added to this, elderly people are frequently limited by homogenising representations, reproducing a sense of non-productivity and marginalisation according to an obsolete industrial model of the life cycle. However, it has to be highlighted that among elderly people it is often possible to observe the emersion of ‘social talent’, performed through activeness in different forms of civic engagement. This paper aims to highlight the determinants of social activity behind the deep versatilities of old age through the results of quanti-qualitative research conducted in Genoa, an Italian town with a high ageing index. By identifying the interactions of multiple indicators, regarding value systems, socioeconomic conditions and different lifestyles of elderly people, the importance of social activity and its determinant predictors among elderly people are highlighted: rethinking their role in contemporary society, enlarging their horizons of capabilities and opportunities and overcoming latent homogenising stereotypes through the promotion of an effective path of active citizenship.

Keywords: social activity, civic engagement, elderly condition, active ageing



Más allá de Estereotipos: Talento, Recursos y Activación Social en las Personas Mayores Postmodernas

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Resumen

Propuestas deseables en términos de envejecimiento activo están condicionadas por la heterogeneidad de las personas mayores. La exploración de tal complejidad se encuentra limitada por representaciones homogeneizadoras que reproducen la sensación de falta de productividad y marginación en relación con un obsoleto modelo industrial del ciclo de vida. Sin embargo, a menudo, entre las personas de edad avanzada, es posible observar la emergencia de un “talento social”, conformado a través de la activación de diferentes formas de compromiso cívico. Este artículo identifica factores determinantes de la activación social que hay detrás de la profunda versatilidad de la vejez, a través de los resultados de un estudio cuanti-cualitativo realizado en Génova, una de las ciudades italianas con índice más alto de envejecimiento. Observando interacciones de múltiples indicadores sobre los sistemas de valores, condiciones socioeconómicas y diferentes estilos de vida, se pone de relieve la importancia de la activación social y sus determinantes entre las personas mayores, ayudando a repensar su papel en la sociedad, ampliando sus posibilidades y superando estereotipos homogeneizadores latentes a través de la promoción de un camino efectivo de ciudadanía activa.

Palabras clave: activación social, compromiso cívico, envejecimiento activo

Defining and applying the concept of talent among elderly people could have an incongruent meaning if we consider how often the conditions of the elderly reflect negative social representations and difficult situations. Indeed, while debates about active and successful ageing spread, as well as an emphasis on the promotion of a more dynamic concept of the later stages of life, deep-rooted cultural stereotypes still affect the elderly population, increasing a sense of non-productivity and marginalisation and consequently reproducing inequalities and social frailty.

The reason behind the perceived conceptual gap between talent and elderly people can be summarised, even if only approximately, by two main aspects: (1) the common stereotypical representation of ageing processes as a declining phase of life; and (2) the definition of talent itself as derived from the leading theoretical trends on human development.

Starting from the first point, and adopting a very general definition, talent is defined as a natural aptitude or skill for something, a particular flair or gift that, in common language, can be extended figuratively to the person possessing such ability. Indeed, commonly we refer to a talent for sport, for arts, for science, and it is not by chance that we speak often about young talents. Such associations between youth and positive characteristics compare symmetrically with the way of conceiving the ageing process merely as a phase of decline in terms of physical and cognitive abilities. The above representation is derived from the resistance of cultural-historic archetypes (Minois, 1989; Johnson, 1998), as well as being reinforced by social definitions behind the ageing process, still embedding individual biographies within the three-phase model of the life cycle (formation, production and retirement), typical of a now surpassed industrial society (Cesareo, 2009).

Such representations are based also on a strong physical accent regarding later life, characterising ageing with a marked process of embodiment. As shown at the end of last century by Woodward (1991) and Featherstone and Hepworth (1998), the entire individual biography is presently conceived as a one-way process, deriving from the deep relationship between bodily transience and the linear trajectory along which life is perceived, in a sort of a hierarchised continuum between positive characteristics (typically bestowed to youth) and negative attributions,

related to old age. The materialism of such attributions is reflected in physical appearance, enhancing the visibility and tangibility of the body, until the point at which old age itself, with the inevitable physical decline, brings us closer to the limit of our own representation. Not by chance, according to such physical conceptions, the corporeality of older age is frequently related to the medicalisation of ageing itself, often combining its representation with disease and illness (Katz, 1996).

Nonetheless, even if decline, especially from a physical point of view, it is undoubtedly a common destiny; yet the ageing process is not necessarily always or only a declining phase. Indeed, when we observe a particular talent or gift in an older person, such ability probably derives from an internal compromise between the disadvantages resulting from the progressive decline and the gains in terms of experience and wisdom, two advantages typically derived from the ageing process itself (Baltes, 1991; Baltes & Mayer, 1999). Experience coincides with a pragmatic, contextualised knowledge acquired and accumulated over time, while wisdom links experience itself to the intuitive dimension, allowing a better grasp on the meanings of events, as well drawing considerations about the real limits or the effective opportunities permitting an individual to adapt to new situations. This does not mean that ageing automatically implies an acquisition of wisdom, but that ageing helps one learn different ways of perceiving and managing reality through experience (Baltes, 1997). For instance, wisdom often coincides with positive forms of adaptation even to traumatic events (Linley, 2003) and empirical studies show how often such abilities are particularly strong in later stages of life (Sternberg, 2005; Webster, 2007). Nonetheless, optimal ageing is mainly achieved through being able to develop and deploy reserve capacities in order to compensate cognitive losses through experience and wisdom. Indeed, exactly such compensation is often at the base of successful ageing differentials in terms of social productivity, adaptive capacity, affectivity and perseverance (Birren & Schroots, 1996).

In this sense, compensation through experience and wisdom is also related to the maintenance of generativity itself, also in later stages of life. Indeed, far from a negative representation of ageing, continuing from Erikson's (1950/1963; 1997) studies, several other observers suggest that generativity may occupy a more central spot in late-life development in

contemporary society, reinforcing ego integrity against a sense of stagnation in late adulthood (Sheldon & Kasser, 2001; de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004; James & Zarrett, 2006). As we will show later, such generativity can also reflect particular social attitudes.

Beyond Stereotypes: Rethinking the Meaning of Talent in Old Age

Nevertheless, coming to the second aspect, regarding the definition of talent among elderly people, the proposed revision of later life as an acquisition phase, even suitable for the emersion of talents and abilities, implies a reconsideration in a less restrictive way of what we scientifically mean by ‘talent’.

According to theoretical trends, particularly following Ericsson’s (1996; 2000) theory of human development, the concept of ‘talent’ coincides with the notion of expertise. Expertise is a consistently superior performance in representative tasks from a domain, where superior means at least two standard deviations above the mean of the population (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). Experts are conceived as outliers that, having spent thousands of hours engaging in deliberate practice, have acquired the mechanisms, including domain-specific knowledge, that support expert performance (Charness & Krampe, 2008, p. 245). Far from being only connected to innate gifts, such superior performances are obtained by the application of a specific knowledge, allowing individuals to adaptively and appropriately respond to environmental stimuli (Charness & Schulteus, 1999) and on deliberate practice, which implies a dedicated process of continuous individual enhancement toward the improvement of performances until reaching a superior level (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Ericsson, 2006).

Similarly interesting are the specific fields where the relationship between ageing processes and expertise has been empirically observed. Several studies have been conducted regarding the performance of older international musicians (Krampe & Ericsson, 1996); of elderly top level chess players (Elo, 1965; 1986); or on aged golfers (Schulz & Curnow, 1988; Gregg & Hall, 2006; Law & Hall, 2009).

A classic example is the case of Arthur Rubenstein, the famous pianist, who played in concert until nearly the age of 90 and who represents a clear

example of the ‘Selection, Optimisation and Compensation’ (SOC) model proposed by [Baltes \(1997\)](#). Consciously adapting to his physical decline, Rubinstein decided to reduce his repertoire by selecting only certain pieces, optimising their performances with even more intensive exercise, and compensating with some tricks of the trade. For instance, being less able to follow the faster rhythm of an allegro, he used to reduce imperceptibly the cadence of slower pieces, giving the impression of emphasising the intensity when shifting to faster paces.

There is no doubt that combining the expression of superior talent with strategies of SOC is not granted to all elderly people. Nevertheless, our efforts in the current study are directed to explore different ways of conceiving and promoting talent in later stages of life.

Indeed, it has to be highlighted that focusing talent only on exceptional performers reproduces the famous Pareto rule for productivity, i.e. estimating that 80% of the land or wealth of a country is owned or created by 20% of the population. [Charness and Krampe \(2008, p. 45\)](#) explicitly refer their definition of talent to this rule, where, apart from the real accuracy of the 80/20 proportion, talent among elderly people is restricted only to exceptional performers in order to safeguard their outstanding productivity from expected age-related decline.

This finding notwithstanding, the following does not intend by any means to criticise the scientifically established relevance of the above studies. Nevertheless, the empirical observations conducted for the present contribution suggest that linking talent only to the elderly top performers relates to a more individualistic and less social concept of talent itself. Indeed, the Italian case study presented in these pages, beyond its implicit limitations, focuses on the deep and diffused social productivity of many aged people: perhaps not excellent performers, but clearly showing a worthy ‘social talent’ conveyed in collective usefulness or expressed in civic engagement.

Going beyond excellence performing and paraphrasing the distinction between genius and talent proposed by [Hegel \(1807\)](#) in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: if genius needs always to be accompanied by some sort of talent, talent by itself can exist even without genius. In contemporary times of such diffused crisis and fragmentation, we think that the ‘social talent’ of elderly people can reflect an invaluable collective resource, especially

according to current rhetoric about promotion of active ageing and social participation among older people (Rowe & Kahn, 1997).

Thus, the aim of this contribution is to strengthen the concept of later age as a socially-productive phase and to focus on the exploration of the possible generative factors of such ‘social talent’ in later life through the results of an Italian case study.

Talent, Structural Resources and Multifaceted Identities in Older People: Evidence from an Italian Case Study

The case study presented in this article is a survey aimed at exploring the conditions of the elderly in Genoa, Italy. Such a context is quite significant because it refers to an Italian town with one of the highest ageing indexes (equal to 235.9 residents over 65 years of age for every 100 residents under 15 years old; *Comune di Genova*, 2013). Genoa is the regional capital of Liguria, which itself represents a specific demographic case in Europe, due to its peculiar ageing population dynamics (Arvati, 2011). Indeed, the observed context depicts a historically specific combination of top-down and bottom-up ageing dynamics. Considering the ageing of the population ‘from above’, in Liguria residents over 65 years of age-constitute 27.5% of the population (significantly surpassing the average of 18.4% in EU16 countries; Eurostat, 2012); they also possess a noteworthy life expectancy (18.2 years for men and 21.9 years for women beyond the age of 65; Poli, 2014). This is combined, as well, with marked ageing dynamics ‘from below’, derived from limited birth rates (equal to 7.4 births every 1000 residents; Poli, 2014); a clear tendency to postpone parenthood (the average age of women having their first child is above 30; Poli, 2014); and a consequent reliance principally on fluxes of external immigration in order to contain local depopulation.

In a similar context, such a growing ageing population can be considered in negative terms, especially when measuring its implicit burden on the welfare system (Micheli, 2007). Nonetheless, it could be conceived as a resource, considering the social potential of a larger part of population, especially the younger among the elderly residents, which are only apparently ‘inactive’ and are able to preserve adequate physical and

cognitive conditions, as well ‘social capabilities’, even for many years following retirement.

For this reason, some results obtained from our survey, conducted with 1,782 over-65 residents in Genoa, seem quite interesting and suggest some further considerations about ‘social talent’ among older people. Indeed, over 50% of the respondents declared themselves to be available for (or to be already involved in) offering their own cultural, social and professional experience to others. Besides this, 25% would be ready to collaborate with (or are already involved with) various organisations and associations; 36% declared themselves available (or already active) to take part in voluntary work or in assistance activities. It has also to be taken in account that 50% of respondents declared they were available or already involved in family activities, like caring of nephews or assisting other seniors in need, showing themselves as major resources in terms of social care giving and subsidiary welfare.

Methodology

Before introducing the analysis, some methodological premises are needed. Considering the theoretical space of the 160,784 over-65 residents of Genoa (as of 1 January 2012), the sampling procedure adopted a territorial design, focusing on the elderly from three specific areas of the town, which were chosen to reflect social and living conditions: working-class metropolitan suburbs, middle-class quarters and upper-level areas (according to Centers’ (1949) taxonomy of urban living areas along class conditions,). The selection also foresaw a factorial plan based on gender and age class (limiting the study to an age class of 65–74 years old and an older age class between 75–84 years old). In this way, a sampling population of 38,984 residents between 65 and 84 year of age was selected, reaching a final sample of 1,782 cases, with a confidence interval of 2.3% and a confidence level of 95%.

As already stated, the effort of this contribution is not to focus on aged exceptional performers, according to a vision of talent as conservation and upkeep of individual expertise or excellence. Instead, in the effort to underline the importance of social contributions of active, aged individuals, the main objective behind this work is merely exploratory, aiming to

understand the different impact of the multiple generative factors determining the emersion of such ‘social talent’ in terms of civic activity among individuals over 65 years of age.

Therefore, our research investigates different generative factors of elderly ‘social talent’, trying to understand the extent to which it depends on personal attitudes (for instance, linking to subjective value systems), combined with adequate levels of health and self-sufficiency, or relying more on contextual and structural conditions (like the presence of an adequate level of services for daily activities and socialisation), often enabled by better individual situations (particularly in terms of education and socioeconomic levels).

The Multiple Generative Factors of Elderly Social Activity: Individual Situations, Contextual Factors and Heterogeneity of Value Systems

To analyse the incidence of the various factors potentially promoting the civic engagement and the emersion of ‘social talent’ among elderly people, we decided to focus on a set of specific indicators to measure the different dimensions involved.

The first dimension regards the dependent variable, i.e. the propensity and availability to perform socially-useful activities. This indicator measures activity willingness activation as a function of four items aimed to observe individual availability: (1) offering professional, social and cultural experience to others; (2) collaborating with organisations and associations; (3) performing voluntary work; and (4) assistance activities, such as fostering or caring.

Substantially, this indicator varies between the two extremes of individuals who cannot be involved because unable due to physical or structural limitations and those who are already practically involved in such activities. In the middle remains the ‘twilight zone’ of those who, still in good health and with adequate resources, are admittedly inactive (perhaps not opportunely motivated) and who declare themselves unavailable but disposable to activity (probably when stimulated by providing adequate opportunities of involvement).

In this sense a main explicative dimension may depend on lesser levels of individual health, often reinforced by age itself. According to the

aforementioned premise, the level of health and self-sufficiency is derived from a combination of data regarding perceived health conditions with items regarding ‘Activities of Daily Living’ (Katz, 1983) and ‘Instrumental Activities of Daily Living’ (Lawton & Brody, 1969) in order to observe autonomy in terms of physical and instrumental skills. More specifically, this is obtained as a function of results regarding four levels of physical and functional autonomy in: (1) taking care of oneself; (2) going up and down staircases; (3) maintaining a clean home; and (4) going grocery shopping. Similarly, age (observed by birth year) was considered in chronological and not in functional terms, as a mere structural variable, because less self-sufficiency and loss of autonomy are only partially related to age, being age-dependent in much more differentiated and dynamic processes (Larsson, 2007).

Equally determinant for social activity are levels of education, derived from studied degrees and qualifications (evaluated considering the International Standard Classification of Education) and the socioeconomic conditions of respondents. These dimensions were considered combining status and class elements, by linking the main occupational and professional conditions experienced in life (observed through detailed open-ended questions successively recoded) to indexes of occupational prestige and socioeconomic status (particularly those developed and applicable to Italian society: see Poli, 2007; Meraviglia & Accornero, 2007) and by analysing the actual income levels of respondents (examining consistency, quality and heterogeneity of the individual income, as well of the household disposable income).

Other generative factors of social activity can be referred to in contextual dimensions, deriving from the background in terms of services and opportunities available in a residential area which could influence quality of life as well the overall socialisation level of individuals (Poli, 2012a, pp. 178–195). This indicator synthesises the satisfaction for services in daily life and is aimed to observe not only the perceived quality, but also the proximity of services, defining accessibility to key facilities in ageing processes. Proximity and quality of services were examined regarding public transport; health and medical care; social assistance; home help; facilities for shopping and dispatch of daily practices (like banking, post

office, etc.); different kinds of cultural or leisure facilities; and availability of training and educational activities.

Adequacy of available services can also be combined with satisfaction with daily relationships, which could be considered at the same time as a determinant factor and as an effect or a consequence of social activity itself. Such satisfaction is measured as socialisation conceived in terms of quality and frequency of everyday social interactions experienced by respondents, including dealing with family members (next of kin, as well more or less distant relatives), friends, acquaintances, previous (or actual, if still employed) work colleagues, neighbours, and (if present) relations with nurses and other caregivers.

The final dimension of possible generative factors of social activity regards the exploration of the value systems of elderly respondents. This dimension was observed through items asking respondents to classify their three main values in life and by investigating attitudes, behaviours and practices (for instance, religious practice, political groups, attitude toward different deviant behaviours, conservatism, etc.). Possible synthetic measures of these dimension were defined through the application of the main patterns derived from theoretical trends about value systems (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004): the polarisation between a survivalist/materialist attitude opposed to a tendency toward self-expression; the juxtaposition of individualist and collectivist attitudes; and, lastly, the contrast between more traditionalist or more secularist-rationalist approaches.

Main Theoretical Patterns

Indeed, a survivalist approach observed in older people could be characterised by pronounced materialism, addressed at both economic and physical safety, where instrumental tendencies toward possessions and health issues become central in the overall vision of life (Inglehart, 1997). Sometimes, this is accompanied by less tolerance toward diversities (showing, in some way, further evidence of less adaptability). On the other hand, the inclination toward an expressive reflexivity is more oriented to explication of identity and individual freedom, ranging from a focus on more ludic and leisure activities, typical of more laid-back attitudes, to

other more engaged forms of self-expression, often expressed in various social activities (Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004).

The individualist approach reflects a personal attitude toward a successful positive self-image, where socialisation and relationships, even if remaining important, are interpreted more instrumentally by the subject as central in their living context (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). This could be combined with the reflexive dimension, especially when observing the value systems of baby boom generation respondents, who often expressed more acquisitive attitudes (derived from having experienced occupational and professional socialisation in affluent historical phases) or sometimes showed a higher focalisation on rights and entitlements, rather than on duties (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, a combination of individualism and reflexivity can be explained in those of older age when socialisation costs become unbearable and consequent disengagement results, until lack of interest in others defines a coping strategy from the stress of collective life (Florea, 1982). Otherwise, a collective orientation focuses on significant belonging to groups as a key aspect of identity and, consequently, the systems of values are more related to common positive objectives; the social context and its actors thus are focused on individual centrality, and relationships and social roles are more stable and prescriptive (Inglehart & Oyserman, 2004). Collectivist issues, like solidarity, ethics, egalitarianism and communitarian identification, especially in younger respondents were derived from past experiences, often related with a direct or indirect involvement in periods of embedded ideals, like for baby boomers having experienced the late 1960s (Binstock & Quadagno, 2001). Such ideal pasts can nowadays be reflected in forms of mutual and ethical collectivism, which can eventually be translated in activity, i.e. participation or engagement toward common values on solidarity, social justice or environmental issues (that can similarly be interpreted as reflexive forms of self-expression).

Similarly, traditionalism underlines aspects like centrality of old-fashioned families and deference to authority, together with religious observance or prescription. Religious practice shows a particular appeal among older respondents due to its re-embedding properties. Indeed, it offers certainty in repetition because it is based on a ritual conception of truth; it values past and tradition by proposing a prevailing role of memory

and it provides occasions of participation as followers and adepts by being an organized form of association (Giddens, 1994). Nonetheless, recent studies stress how spiritual attitudes (not necessarily conceived as religiousness expressed in a formalised doctrine) can produce health and mental benefits in later stages of life (Oman & Thoresen, 2005). On the other hand, a secularised approach focuses on laicism and rationality (Norris & Inglehart, 2007), often related to higher levels of education and status (again, more diffuse among the younger respondents of the study). In this case, the Italian cultural context plays a major role, explained by the secularisation process that started in the 1970s (Martinelli & Chiesi, 2002). On the one hand there is the progressive religious debunking of daily life, which, particularly in Italy, does not necessarily lead to atheism but has produced a privatisation of religious belief, disengaged from ecclesiastic formalities and shaping a civil sense of religion that sets spirituality beyond religion itself (De Vita, Berti, & Nasi, 2005). On the other hand, such processes entail consequences also for the identities of older people, especially the more educated, promoting a diffused re-planning of consciousness and a major autonomy in identity processes, awareness and choice (this is observable, for instance, in the diffusion of positive attitudes toward end of life issues, like euthanasia or suicide; see Lloyd, 2004). Nonetheless, social activity can be promoted both through the effect of religious practice and related acquaintances, reinforcing association, mutualism and solidarity, through spirituality and awareness beyond religiousness, especially in a reshaping of individual existence in a laic sense, often relating personal reality to part of a wider social and collective dimension (especially when considering the heritage left to newer generations).

All of the six polarities mentioned above (survivalism/materialism, self-expression, individualism, collectivism, traditionalism and secularism) were measured through factorial scores.

In this way, combining health conditions, class and status factors, as well socialisation and quality of life perspectives with value dimensions, it was possible to develop a set of indicators aimed to synthesise different structural, contextual and individual key dimensions that could explain social activity among the observed sample of respondents over the age of 65. This permitted the investigation of the influence of multiple hybrid

generative factors behind civic engagement among older people, enlightening understanding of the emersion of social abilities (if not talents), helpful in redefining and strengthening individual identities by satisfying the generative needs and the creativity that are presently more and more diffusely persistent also in later stages of life.

Such heuristic goals were pursued through a bivariate correlation analysis of the indicators outlined above, in order to observe possible relationships, and through a linear multiple regression model, aimed at creating a possible predictive model, taking the willingness toward engaging in social activity as a ‘social talent’ proxy and all other considered variables as predictors of such dimensions. To perform the analysis, all of the aforementioned indicators were transformed into standardised forms.

Results

Observing the bivariate correlation analysis (Table 1), it is not surprising to observe a negative correlation (-.262, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed) of the willingness toward engaging in social activity with age, because availability can be inversely related to health conditions, progressively declining in the ageing process. This is confirmed by a positive value (+.297, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed) with health and self-sufficiency. In this sense, less availability depends on natural decline of overall health conditions, progressively shifting the respondents from the status of potentially active actors in terms of social assistance to the condition of consumer in need of support. Indeed, as expected, availability for social activity is possible in effective conditions of providing active care giving and support to others, particularly among respondents of the baby boom generation.

Significant positive correlations of the availability for social activity are observable with structural socioeconomic factors. Indeed, the indicator scored positive values of +.281 for education level and +.166 for socioeconomic conditions (both significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). This relates also with the positive correlations of +.224 with satisfaction with daily relationships and of +.184 with satisfaction with available services.

At the same time, this confirms that the desired positive effects in terms of integration derived from social activity practices (Reilly, 2006) are

necessarily conditioned by the availability of sufficient means in terms of health and socioeconomic situation.

Table 1
Matrix of correlations

		Willing-ness for activity	Age	Health and self- sufficiency	Education	Socio- economic conditions	Satisfaction with socialisation
Age	Pearson Corr.	-.262(**)					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
	N	1,782					
Health and self- sufficiency	Pearson Corr.	.297(**)	-.347(**)				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000				
	N	1,782	1,782				
Education	Pearson Corr.	.281(**)	-.164(**)	.215(**)			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000			
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782			
Socioeconomi c condition	Pearson Corr.	.166(**)	-.041	.255(**)	.331(**)		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.081	.000	.000		
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782		
Satisfaction with socialisation	Pearson Corr.	.224(**)	-.037	.202(**)	.086(**)	.177(**)	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.120	.000	.000	.000	
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	
Satisfaction with services	Pearson Corr.	.184(**)	-.063(**)	.083(**)	.004	.077(**)	.150(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.008	.000	.856	.001	.000
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782
Materialism/ survivalism	Pearson Corr.	-.065(**)	-.005	-.012	-.140(**)	-.021	-.022
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.831	.620	.000	.372	.357
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782
Self- expression	Pearson Corr.	.281(**)	-.212(**)	.274(**)	.200(**)	.148(**)	.187(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782
Individualism	Pearson Corr.	-.063(**)	.000	.019	.018	-.004	-.043
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.994	.416	.456	.862	.072
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782
Collectivism	Pearson Corr.	.125(**)	-.035	.053(*)	.054(*)	.064(**)	.056(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.145	.026	.024	.007	.017
	N	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777	1,777
Traditionalism	Pearson Corr.	.204(**)	.022	.002	.058(*)	.041	.015
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.351	.931	.014	.081	.526
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782
Secularism	Pearson Corr.	-.205(**)	-.016	-.008	-.032	-.021	-.040
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.504	.743	.176	.373	.095
	N	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782	1,782

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 1
Matrix of correlations (cont.)

		Satisfaction with services	Materialism /survivalism	Self- expression	Indivi- dualism	Collec- tivism	Tradi- tionalism
Materialism/ survivalism	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	.043 .067 1,782					
Self- expression	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	.073(**) .002 1,782	-.077(**) .001 1,782				
Individualism	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	-.021 .368 1,782	.008 .727 1,782	.005 .837 1,782			
Collectivism	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	.088(**) .000 1,777	-.046 .052 1,777	.074(**) .002 1,777	.012 .610 1,777		
Traditionalism	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	.123(**) .000 1,782	.031 .188 1,782	.036 .126 1,782	-.091(**) .000 1,782	.027 .252 1,777	
Secularism	Pearson Corr. Sig. (2-tailed) N	-.122(**) .000 1,782	-.030 .213 1,782	-.048(*) .041 1,782	.088(**) .000 1,782	.025 .291 1,777	-.532(**) .000 1,782

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed);

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Furthermore, it's interesting to observe the relationship between willingness towards activity and the different polarities of value systems. Indeed, the aforementioned indicator scored Pearson's correlation values of -.065 for the survivalist approach (significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed), expressing a certain independency within a materialist perspective. Conversely, social activity levels seem to positively covariate when individuals show self-expressive orientations (Pearson's correlation is equal to +.281, significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). In this sense, civic engagement, for instance, through voluntarism or different forms of association and social participation, describes a central expression of personal identity. This is confirmed also by a substantial independence of willingness for social activity, with a more individualistic approach and a positive correlation with a more collectivist orientation (Pearson's correlation scores are -.063 for individualism and +.125 for collectivism, both significant at the 0.01 level, 2-tailed). Finally, social activity seems to rely more on a traditionalist approach (probably reflecting social

engagement as often combined with religious practice and association) and to be negatively related with a secularist orientation (Pearson’s correlation scores are +.204 for traditionalism and -.205 for secularism, both significant at the 0.001 level, 2-tailed).

The indicators can be combined in a linear multiple regression model to observe their effects as predictors of willingness toward engaging in social activity as the dependent variable. It has to be said that some implicit limitations derive from the fitting of the linear model with the observed data. Indeed, considering the model summary (Table 2), a limited R value of +.521 for the multiple correlation coefficient expresses only a slight correlation between the observed and predicted values of the dependent variable. Similarly, the R squared value of +.272 indicates that a small proportion of variation in the dependent variable is explained by the proposed regression model, confirming that the model does not fit the data perfectly; this mainly depends on the relative adequacy of the linear function.

Table 2
Model Summary for linear regression
(Dependent variable: Willingness for activity)

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.521(a)	.272	.267	.85683601

a Predictors: (Constant), Secularism, Health and self-sufficiency, Materialism/survivalism, Collectivism, Individualism, Satisfaction with services, Satisfaction with socialisation, Education, Self-expression, Age, Socioeconomic condition, Traditionalism.

Table 3 summarises the results of the analysis of variance: a larger regression residual sum of squares (1,295,072) is present in comparison with the regression sum of squares (483,135), indicating that the model accounts for only a portion of variation in the dependent variable. Even if the model fails to explain a lot of the variation, the significance value of the F statistic is null, showing that, as much as possible, the considered independent variables do a good job explaining the variation in the dependent variable.

Table 3

ANOVA (Dependent variable: Willingness for activity)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	483.135	12	40.261	54.839	.000(a)
Residual	1295.072	1,764	.734		
Total	1778.208	1,776			

a Predictors: (Constant), Secularism, Health and self-sufficiency, Materialism/survivalism, Collectivism, Individualism, Satisfaction with services, Satisfaction with socialisation, Education, Self-expression, Age, Socioeconomic condition, Traditionalism.

This is confirmed in Table 4 which shows the coefficients of the estimated regression model (B and Beta coefficients are the same because the analysis was performed with standardised values).

Table 4

Coefficients of the estimated regression model

(Dependent variable: Willingness for activity (Y_i))

	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-.001	.020		-.034	.973
Age (X_1)	-.153	.022	-.153	-6.904	.000
Health and self-sufficiency (X_2)	.131	.023	.132	5.690	.000
Education (X_3)	.169	.022	.169	7.566	.000
Socioeconomic condition (X_4)	.010	.022	.010	.433	.665
Satisfaction with socialisation (X_5)	.122	.021	.122	5.730	.000
Satisfaction with services (X_6)	.100	.021	.100	4.755	.000
Materialism/survivalism (X_7)	-.034	.021	-.034	-1.665	.096
Self-expression (X_8)	.129	.022	.129	5.916	.000
Individualism (X_9)	-.041	.020	-.041	-2.022	.043
Collectivism (X_{10})	.077	.021	.077	3.729	.000
Traditionalism (X_{11})	.111	.024	.111	4.606	.000
Secularism (X_{12})	-.118	.024	-.118	-4.878	.000

The estimate model is as follows:

$$Y_i = 0.0 - 0.153X_1 + 0.132X_2 + 0.169X_3 + 0.010X_4 + 0.122X_5 + 0.100X_6 + 0.034X_7 + 0.129X_8 - 0.041X_9 + 0.077X_{10} + 0.111X_{11} - 0.118X_{12}$$

The observation of the t statistic, describing the relative importance of the different variables in the model, confirms as positive predictors the following indicators: Health and self-sufficiency, Education, Satisfaction with socialisation and services, as well as attitudes more related to Self-expression, Collectivism and Traditionalism orientations. On the contrary, the t values describe as interesting negative predictors the variables of Age and the prevalence of Individualism and Secularism attitudes. The remaining indicators, like Socioeconomic condition and Materialist/survivalist attitude, show a lesser intensity in t values, only partially explaining the model but not in themselves particularly useful predictors.

Final Reflections

It must be said that the proposed analysis shows some limitations. For instance, the observed correlations do not express strong Pearson values, but essentially trails of tendency in terms of positive or negative relations between social activity and some possible generative factors, as well of substantial independency of other factors. Similarly, the linear model seems to be only limitedly fitted to the data distribution. Given this, the analysis shows evidence of how some contextual as well individual dimensions influence more than other factors the availability of social activities for older people.

Investigating the explicative factors of this dimension was considered as the main objective of our analysis because, beyond the introductive metaphor of talent, social activity refers to the maintenance of a social role, reinforcing civic engagement, volunteerism and activism as critical forms of participation, thus promoting a community's social capital (Achenbaum, 2006) and surpassing the standard 'deficit model' of ageing, which is only focused on needs and benefits (Hudson, 2006).

At the same time, the differences in levels of social activity confirm the deep heterogeneity of older people far beyond cultural homogenising stereotypes. Indeed, the observation of different structural conditions is essential in defining the substantial resources potentially disposable in order to make people active both in a social sense of collective usefulness, and an individual perspective in terms of successful and optimal ageing. Similarly, the positive socialisation dimensions are both an effect to be aimed for, and at the same time an individual resource that can be used at a personal level, producing positive consequences also from a collective perspective. At the same time, value axes are traces of possible different combinations in terms of orientations, reaffirming the deep complexity and diversity in experiencing the ageing process.

Older respondents may have been less available for social activities considering the potentially major incidences of pre-frailty or frailty situations in terms of health or socioeconomic conditions. This sometimes explains the development of survivalist and materialist attitudes and progressive social disengagement (explained in self-preservation through a progressively practiced process of social self-removal and self-exclusion; see [Pugliese, 2011](#)). Similar conditions lead such individuals to be considered more as intended stakeholders for social care rather than socially-engaged actors. Nonetheless, when adequate levels of health and socioeconomic conditions are combined with a cultural propensity toward solidarity and mutualism (often promoted by relationships and association practices, improving socialisation itself) it is possible to observe a maintained, active social engagement even in significantly older individuals (see [Poli, 2012b](#)).

The younger elderly respondents, typically baby boomers, often swung between more hedonistic and disengaged profiles, focused on ludic and recreational activities (often experiencing the freedom of recent retirement), and more socially engaged profiles, where increasing rolelessness and the consequent risk of social exclusion limit social participation and engagement. Between such extremes stands a vast ‘twilight zone’ where willingness toward engaging in activity remains ambivalent and probably should be promoted from both an institutional and policy perspective.

Beyond the age-related factors, the trade-off between social activity and disengagement, even if being deeply tied to subjectivity, is a main factor of

future well-being for those who have just entered the ageing process; it also assumes a key role precisely in the emersion of a ‘social talent’ in older age as a successful ageing determinant.

To summarise, different results in terms of social activity can be substantially referred to a pair of key conceptual categories: synthesised in terms of capability and of reflexivity. Following a capability perspective means referring to [Sen’s \(1999\)](#) approach where, in cases of significant civic engagement, social activity is considered by the older individual as a function of their well-being. Considering the positive effect on conservation of social role and identity, such an expression of ‘social talent’ is an objective to be maintained for the full exercise of personality and generativity in later stages of life. At the same time, even if a similar expression is a clear functioning of well-being, it implies the availability of individual resources in terms of adequate socioeconomic conditions as well of health and self-sufficiency.

Otherwise said, it’s true that looking for integration by engaging socially helps individuals to become integrated ([Reilly, 2006](#)), but also especially means that such availability of social activity relies, first of all, on sufficient disposable resources, both in a physical sense and in terms of adequate socioeconomic conditions. Consequently, such trade-offs between availability and unavailability depend also on different levels of individual agency connected to inequality affecting a significant proportion of elderly people, particularly in poorer conditions.

Therefore, the exercise of ‘social talent’ in later stages of life becomes a function of well-being and, at the same time, a capability for living, where the recognition and expansion of opportunities for elderly people in terms of activity should be considered by institutions as a main starting point for any effective successful ageing policy. Such opportunities should be considered diffuse as much as possible and promoted, responding adequately to [Laslett’s \(1989\)](#) call for a consideration of old age not as a time for indolence; otherwise ‘talent’ in older age will always be reserved for the expression of excellence performed by a very limited part of the elderly population, mainly those already ageing in better conditions.

Nevertheless, such forms of social activity as a capability for optimal ageing have to be reconsidered both within a collective dimension, interesting from the macro-perspective, as well as at an individual level,

taking into account different attitudes and orientations developed by older people. This introduces the second conceptual category useful to the interpretation of our model, namely reflexivity.

Indeed, it's not by chance that self-expression has emerged as one of the most interesting predictors of willingness for social activity. From this perspective, according to the theoretical path started by Archer (2003; 2007), it's useful to interpret the relationship between the willingness to engage in social activity and self-expressive issues in later life through a shift from self-reflectivity to forms of inter-relational and dialogical reflexivity.

As seen before, self-expression among elderly people can emerge in antithetical ways. For instance, it could be related to disengagement determined by progressive social self-exclusion, often typical of older elderly individuals. Similarly it can be related to more laid-back attitudes, focused on ludic expression, for instance, in early phases of retirement, when the achievement of economic self-sufficiency through a pension combines with still adequate health conditions and the new experience of larger amounts of free time. From such a perspective, a sense of self-reflectivity emerges, for instance, as a sort of 'liquid' hedonism or as a conservative survivalist attitude (clearly depending on socioeconomic and health conditions), typically reproducing an overall vision of life based on a self-referenced mirror image, focused on disengagement behaviours that increase social fragmentation and the risk of isolation with declining physical resources.

Otherwise, reflexivity could be expressed as consciousness of one's own civic role, preserving individualism in firm personal beliefs of being a holder of rights and entitlements toward society and institutions (Samuelson, 1995) and leading to social activity. Nonetheless, such demands for better conditions can also be a potential response to generativity, often expressed in different forms of participation as a reaction to the need for creating a somewhat better world as a heritage for future generations.

According to Archer (2003), the shift from a self-referential and reflective perspective toward social reflexivity is realised through a (more or less) conscious internal conversation, leading people to rethink their own condition and social role, as individuals, as grandparents, as parents, as

citizens or as tax payers and (eventually) realising a correspondent change toward a more socially-oriented and less self-reflected lifestyle. So, often the demand for rights and entitlements or simply the desire to change something for the better find an outcome in social activity. It's the rediscovery of the reflexive positive effect that comes from doing something collectively oriented, where individual identity is confirmed and developed through the consciousness of producing something socially valuable. This was the most frequent explanation given during interviews when exploring the involvement of many older respondents in social activities, in voluntary assistance and care giving or in cultural activism. Such engagement is the main expression of flair and ability in old age, where talent is rediscovered in its essence of social action, intentionally and positively addressed toward other people.

This, on the one hand, explains how older people often play silently a leading role in voluntary work or in caring and assistance activities (often without adequate social recognition) and, on the other hand, it underlines the need to promote relational reflexivity (Archer, 2007; Donati, 2011) as a key element for empowerment and social involvement of elderly people toward optimal ageing processes.

In other words, the definition of talent in older age groups is related not merely to doing something better than others, but much more in doing something for others.

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