

PERSONALITY RECOURSES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
IN A GROUP OF MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN: A CASE STUDY

Lic. Rebeca Alonso González, * Lic. Karen Pérez Molina**

Finlay-Albarran Faculty, Havana University of Medical Sciences.

rebeca.alonso@infomed.sld.cu

*Specialist in Health Psychology, Master in Health Psychology, Assistant Professor at the Finlay-Albarran Faculty of the Havana University of Medical Sciences.

**MS in Health Psychology, Primero de Enero Teaching Polyclinic, Playa Municipality, Havana.

ABSTRACT

CONSIDERING HOW LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE CONDITIONS THAT IMPROVE SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING OF THE MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN, HER HEALTH AND QUALITY OF LIFE, THIS PAPER PRESENTS A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN BETWEEN 45 AND 59 YEARS OLD, LIVING IN THE LA LISA MUNICIPALITY WITH THE PURPOSE OF EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEIR PERSONALITY-ORIENTED RECOURSES AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING. FOLLOWING A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY, THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF THE WOMEN STUDIED WAS DIAGNOSED AND THEIR PERSONALITY-ORIENTED RECOURSES WERE CHARACTERIZED IN ORDER TO QUALITATIVELY EVALUATE THE RELATION BETWEEN PERSONALITY RECOURSES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING. THE STUDY REVEALED THAT IN ALL CASES, THE PERSONALITY RECOURSES OF THE WOMEN STUDIED MODULATE THEIR PERCEPTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING. SELF-ESTEEM, MARRIAGE AND MATERNITY WERE THE MOST

RELEVANT ASPECTS IN THEIR EVALUATION OF PERSONAL WELL-BEING. LIKEWISE, COUPLE STABILITY AND HARMONY WERE CLOSELY LINKED TO THE SENSE OF PERSONAL WELL-BEING IN THE CASES STUDIED.

KEY WORDS: PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING, PERSONALITY, MIDDLE-AGED FEMALE

INTRODUCTION

Psychological well-being can acquire a particular expression in middle age. It is a time when the sense of existence is reconsidered and our own values and those of persons important to us are reassessed. Often, subjects question their personal achievements and evaluate their mistakes and best decisions in terms of their aspirations. It is a process of reassessing your life, which Psychology texts describe as the second identity crisis (1).

Middle age is also the period in which we face important social and biological problems, namely, the ageing of our parents, the concerns regarding the adolescence and youth of our children, widowhood, retirement, health and physical changes related to ageing and the inevitable change in our life style (2).

This is a process undergone by men and women alike but particularly difficult for the latter, since women undergo significant neuroendocrine changes conditioning their transit to the non-reproductive stage of their biological cycle: climateric and menopause. These events bring about an imbalance in their biological processes (3) forcing their bodies to readapt all its functions.

This adds to the fact that it is precisely the middle-aged woman who usually takes care of the elderly, the children (alone or with their partners), and grandchildren; who is in charge of managing family economy and doing most household chores. All this contributes to increase her vulnerability at this life stage.

Therefore, during this period women experience certain biological sensitivities and face an undeniable truth which cannot be postponed: ageing (and the emotional impact of being aware of it). They are thus immersed in a process that has a high psychological cost and that can lead to a sense of impotence, low self-esteem, and frustration both in terms of aspirations and well-being (4).

Though many efforts have been made to improve and protect female health, no relevant results have been achieved in terms of health policies and strategies for the middle-aged woman.

Likewise, in psychological theory, women seem to be mainly identified by the difference in their sexual and reproductive relations. Scant references to middle-aged women's psychological development is found in studies of an exclusively biological nature, which basically evaluate chronological age and woman's position in the marital-reproductive cycle (5).

As a rule, research on the life development of middle-aged women is mainly focused on studying the decline of their body, hindering the possibility of obtaining more and diverse knowledge about the psychological development of this important age group (6). Consequently, there is not much theoretical reference to draw on in terms of the psychological well-being of the middle-aged woman.

Considering the foregoing, it is essential to have a broad and comprehensive knowledge of middle-aged women thus eliminating unidirectional theories. For this purpose, research providing a multifaceted and positive understanding of the middle-aged woman is a must.

The need to conduct this study is grounded on this methodological challenge in order to fill the knowledge gap in the variables or dimensions that can influence the perception of well-being in this important population group.

PERSONALITY AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Several studies have pointed out the importance of personality variables to explain well-being and life satisfaction. Research in this direction has revealed that the personality, characteristics, and psychological perception of individuals, as well as the way in which they cope with daily life difficulties, among other aspects, will define their perception of psychological well-being (7).

In this regard, personality recourses are among the most relevant variables playing an important role in psychological well-being, considering that the latter is the result of complex interactions within the personality as a whole in which a significant number of variables are involved.

Personality recourses have been defined as those specificities of individual subjectivity that enable a fruitful interaction with the environment, face reality in a constructive manner and develop the personality. They enable individuals to face life difficulties in a constructive manner through self-acceptance and self-understanding, elevating their active nature and self-determination as well as their capacity to assume decisions and take responsibility for their actions (8).

A subject can count on many different personality recourses. This study deals with self-value and interests.

Self-value has been widely studied as a psychological formation and a personality subsystem. This implies reflections, assessments, and experiences on one self and on the essential contents of one's own personality through which the most important motivational trends in which the subject is emotionally involved are expressed.

Self-value not only has a high bearing on the harmonious development of the personality and effective behavior but, if adequate, is a very important source of satisfaction and well-

being.

Hence, psychological well-being researchers agree that the concept of one self (and the aspirations derived from it) is an important variable to explain personal well-being.

The same goes for interests, understood as attributes of motivational regulation. They are specific psychological formations guiding the subject to certain fields of social activity; they are forms of expression of human motivation contributing energy, direction and persistence to the behavior, therefore intervening in the personality-oriented regulation of conduct (9).

Hence, when subjects have certain firm and stable interests in an activity they will perform better in such activity and this will enable them to enhance their individual potentials and increase their psychological well-being.

On the basis of these theoretical reflections, this study aimed at describing the link between the personality recourses of a group of middle-aged women and the way in which they perceive their psychological well-being.

Answering this question was the main motivation for conducting the research described in this article. The objectives were to characterize the personality recourses of the women studied, diagnose the degree of psychological well-being perceived by them, and evaluate how it relates to their personality recourses.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research conducted was empirical, descriptive and with a qualitative approach. A case study involving 5 women between 45 and 59 years old, living in the La Lisa municipality was conducted to analyze the personality recourses involved in their psychological well-being. Personality recourses and psychological well-being were the two categories analyzed in this study.

In the study, psychological well-being is understood as the subjective assessment that expresses the degree of satisfaction of persons with specific aspects of their lives or with their lives as a whole and which results from the balance between expectations and achievements in most relevant areas for the individual.

This category, of a subjective-experiential nature, expresses the positive feeling and constructive thought of the human being about himself/herself regarding specific aspects of their physical, psychical and social performance (10).

In order to reach a conclusion on this category, information provided by the following dimensions were analyzed: self-esteem, life project, health perception, couple relations and gender constraint.

Likewise, personality recourses were evaluated through self-value and interests.

In the case of self-value, the following indicators were taken into account: body image, self-knowledge, self-value flexibility, and aspiration level.

To evaluate interests, the range of interests and their regulating nature were the indicators analyzed.

Primary sources were used, since research was based on first-hand collected data.

SAMPLE

The sample included five middle-aged women attending doctor's office 45 of the Aleyda Fernandez Teaching Polyclinic in the La Lisa municipality. It is a purposive sample selected on the basis of criteria for inclusion and exclusion, according to which the first five middle-aged women giving their consent to participate in the study were analyzed.

The field work with these five cases provided sufficient information to characterize and study in depth the psychological well-being and personality recourses categories, so it was

considered that it was not necessary to include any further case in the sample.

ETHICS

Women selected gave their consent. They were informed about the objectives of the study and assurances were given as to the confidential nature and ethical use of the information they would provide.

TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURES

To gather information on psychological well-being, the following instruments were applied: ISP-RELEBA, self-value scales, in-depth interviews, compositions ("Who am I?" and "An ideal day"), a self-value questionnaire (drawn by the authors) and B. Rotter and J. Rofferty "complete the phrase test" adapted to the purposes of the study.

ISP-RELEBA is an instrument that evaluates personal satisfaction of middle-aged women according to five well-being indicators, namely, health perception, self-esteem, gender constraint, life project, and couple relations.

This instrument, designed by the Public Health School, has been widely validated in Cuban middle-aged women and allows us to establish a personal satisfaction rate through the indicators assessed. It has high internal coherence (Cronbach coefficient 0.94), an adequate criterion ($r=0,62$ with $p<=0,05$), construction ($p=0,000$), and content validity (11).

Answers provided by the subjects for each instrument were analyzed to grade the techniques applied, except in the case of the ISP-RELEBA because it is quantitatively graded.

Likewise, information obtained was triangulated. This was obtained from:

- information sources: the partners of the women studied were also interviewed in order to compare their information with the evaluation made by these women about

their personality recourses and the psychological well-being they perceive. The self-value scales were also applied in these interviews;

- instruments: variables were explored using different techniques to evaluate the consistency of the data obtained,

Instruments were applied during visits made to the homes of the women studied and in the same order as previously mentioned.

ANALYSIS AND PROCESSING TECHNIQUES

The data processing method used was categorization of information obtained. This was done following exclusivity and completeness criteria for data categorization.

OUTCOMES

First of all we must point out that this research does not pursue the aim of establishing trends regarding the outcomes obtained. Its purpose is to gain insight into the phenomenon studied from the point of view of the individuals analyzed.

Among the most significant outcomes we must highlight the fact that four out of the five cases studied perceived psychological well-being. These are women with positive feelings and evaluations about their lives as they have fulfilled their goals.

In one case only there is a conflicting perception of psychological well-being, expressed in terms of satisfactions and dissatisfactions. In this case the woman is frustrated due to the fact that she was not able to study or become a worker.

The study also revealed that self-esteem, health perception and couple relations are indicators closely related to the subjective well-being of the individuals studied. All of them had positive self-esteem and health perception. Likewise, all the women in the sample had a

stable, lasting and harmonious couple relation, an important element on which their psychological well-being is grounded.

Another interesting result was that out of the five cases studied, one had a well-structured life project with clearly defined goals and aspirations beyond the family framework and family functions.

Regarding gender constraint, the study reveals that it does not contribute significantly to psychological well-being of the women studied. Only one case revealed an overload of household roles and functions.

As to personality recourses, we found adequate self-value in all the women as a result of their wide knowledge about the physical and moral qualities of their personalities as well as of a positive self-image of their bodies. Such self-value is also the result of a level of aspirations in accordance with the actual possibilities of being attained.

Likewise, four of the five cases studied showed that interests were poor, not varied and almost exclusively confined to the family and household areas. Only one of the women in the sample showed many and diverse interests, which were true triggers for her conduct.

Finally, research results reveal that having certain personality recourses (namely, adequate self-value and concrete and effective interests) is linked to the well-being perception of the women studied.

DATA TRIANGULATION

The information provided by the partners of the women in the sample in terms of psychological well-being and personality recourses, coincided in all cases with the assessments made in this regard by the women studied.

DISCUSSION

Coinciding with the references in the works of Lawton (1982), Andrews and Withey (1976), and Michalos (1985), the subjective well-being of the women in the sample is the expression of the existing correlation between their expectations and their achievements in the most important areas of their lives. This result finds an explanation in Michalos' Multiple Discrepancies Theory (12), in which the "achievement-aspiration" discrepancy is a high indicator of the well-being perceived.

It is worth noting that in all the women studied, psychological well-being stems from their personal achievements within the family and the couple relationship, since these are women who have a solid and stable marriage and feel satisfied because they have accomplished their aspirations of having a family, children and a stable marriage, and for having satisfactorily performed their roles as a mother, daughter, and wife.

This result coincides with those obtained in previous studies (13), which have shown the importance of the family and couple importance in subjective well-being.

We must note, however, that in all the cases studied well-being is built on the basis of being in accordance with the roles and functions assigned to women from a social and cultural perspective; roles and functions that thanks to gender constraints shape the female subjectivity from childhood.

Likewise, many studies reveal that persons of both sexes who are married or living in consensual union are more happy than those who are divorced, widow/widower, or separated or even those who have never been married or lived in consensual union (14), thus we know today that marital status is one of the variables that more coherently predicts psychological well-being.

Therefore, when there is a stable and harmonious union, as is the case with all the women in the sample, life in couple will undoubtedly provide its members with the material, emotional,

instrumental and information support that, in general, positively modulates their relation with the environment and their perception of well-being.

Furthermore, outcomes also reveal that the psychological well-being perceived by the middle-aged women studied is related to their personality recourses. In this regard, and adequate self-value in these women enhances the degree of personal well-being they perceive.

In our view, in these cases self-value is a source of satisfaction and, therefore, qualifies the psychological well-being of the women studied.

As to interests as personality recourses, the study revealed a similar behavior as found in previous studies (15), which have revealed poor goals and interests in middle-aged women.

Understanding this result means taking into consideration that interests, as attributes of motivational regulation, are not isolated dynamic units guiding the immediate behavior of the subject, but they contain personality orientation as a whole. It is a matter of taking them into consideration in the complex process of influencing personality. Only then can we understand the fact that the interests of the women studied are closely linked to their other motivational formations and that they are consistent with the guiding trend of their personalities, a trend that is no doubt immersed in the family and couple relation context.

However, despite that the interests of these women can work as a disposition system reflecting the essential motivational directions of their personalities, the fact that they are so narrow in most of the cases studied, limits their personal enhancement and the development of their potentials as individuals in other spheres of human activity.

CONCLUSIONS

Under the conditions of this study and in terms of the sample studied we can conclude the following:

1. The personality recourses of the women studied modulate, in all cases, the perception they have about their psychological well-being.
2. Fulfilling personal aspirations and goals regarding motherhood and marriage was an important element for psychological well-being in the evaluation of all the women studied.
3. Self-esteem is one of the essential elements in the perception of psychological well-being in the middle-aged women studied.
4. A stable, consolidated and affective couple relation is closely linked to the feeling of personal satisfaction in the cases studied.
5. In these cases, except one, interests play a passive role in terms of intention, and in terms of content are confined to the family and household areas, consequently generating a life project almost exclusively confined to their homes and the traditional roles assigned to women in it.

REFERENCES

1. Febles Elejalde MM. La adultez media: una nueva etapa de desarrollo. Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Médicas; 2008.
2. Artilles L, Navarro D. Género: categoría de impacto en la criticidad del síndrome climatérico. Revista Cubana de Medicina General Integral 1999; 14(6):527-32.
3. Botella Llusió J. La edad crítica. Climatorio y menopausia. Barcelona: Salvat Editores; 1990.
4. Perera S, Santos LI. Crisis: acercamiento general a las principales problemáticas de la adultez media. Monograph. School of Psychology, University of Havana; 2002.
5. Palacio VY, Pedro MY. La mujer adulto medio: breve acercamiento a su realidad.

Monograph. School of Psychology, University of Havana; 2002.

6. Santiago Sanz R. La menopausia y la edad media de las mujeres: un análisis antropológico. Department of Psychology and Sociology, University of Zaragoza [accessed: 2010 February 5]. Available at: <http://www.enplenitud.com/nota.asp?articuloID=2341>
7. González Rey F. Personalidad, modo de vida y salud. Chapter 1. Mexico D.F.: Ed. UNAM; 1992.
8. Fernández R. L. Pensando en la personalidad. Selección de lecturas. T. II. Havana City: Editorial de Ciencias Médicas; 2006.
9. Sánchez Acosta ME, Dopico Pérez HM. El interés como fuerza motivacional. Una metodología para el control en la Educación Física. School of Physical Culture, University of Camaguey; 2008.
10. García-Viniegras CR. Construcción y validación de una técnica para evaluar el bienestar psicológico. Doctoral Thesis for a Ph.D. in Health Sciences, Havana City; 2004.
11. Alonso González R, Artiles Visbal L, Bayarre Veá H. Construcción de un instrumento para medir la satisfacción personal de las mujeres de edad mediana. Master Degree Paper. Havana City; 1995.
12. Michalos AC. Multiple Discrepancies Theory. In Social Indicators Research. 1985.
13. Batista-Forguet JM. La medida de la calidad de vida percibida en la mujer. Propuesta de un sistema de indicadores sociales de igualdad entre los géneros. Madrid: Ministry of Social Affairs-Women Institute; 1994.
14. Lee GR, Seccombe K, Shehan CL. Marital status and personal happiness: An analysis of trend data. J Marriage Family 1991; 53:839-44.

15. Díaz Llanes G, Alonso González R, Bayarre Veá H. Factores de riesgo de insatisfacción con la vida en mujeres de edad mediana. Revista Cubana de Higiene y Epidemiología 2002; 40(3) [on-line version].