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Active ageing in an affluent society – Trends in activity patterns among the ‘young old’ in Switzerland

Introduction

This contribution describes trends in selected social, cultural and physical activities among persons aged 65-74 in Switzerland. The aim is to analyse how far younger cohorts of elderly women and men lead a more active life than earlier cohorts. The chosen context is an affluent society and it is well known that active ageing is primarily observed among affluent groups of elderly. But even within affluent societies it is not always clear, how far active ageing has expanded. Or is it just a post-modern concept based on the behaviour of small elites of elderly persons?

Switzerland – contextual background

Economic security, health and active social participation at higher ages are strongly interrelated (Sirven et al. 2013). A good health and a secure economic situation are major conditions for active ageing. The economic and health conditions of the elderly – and the social basis for active ageing - vary strongly within Europe. Table 1 illustrates this fact by indicating the proportion of respondents aged 65-74 experiencing a good subjective health and a comfortable economic situation in different European countries.

High values concerning subjective health and the financial situation of households are observed in North European countries, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In Switzerland the economic security of the elderly is supported by an elaborated system of old age security (combining old age pensions on a pay-as-you-go system with a system of capital-based old-age security). Regarding the economic situation of the elderly one has to consider the fact that Switzerland – not destroyed by the Second World War II – was able to profit immensely from the re-construction of Western Europe after 1945 (resulting in much more affluence among the elderly of today than in many other European countries). Less affluence and widespread poverty among the elderly are observed in South and Eastern Europe; a situation reinforced by the economic crisis of the last years (Cavasso, Weber 2013).

In Switzerland, Sweden or Ireland more than seventy percent of the elderly value their health as good or very good. Switzerland belongs to the European countries with comparatively extended healthy life expectancies (Jagger et al. 2011). Economic conditions and health in old age are strongly interrelated. Comparing European countries shows a high positive correlation between the proportion of respondents with good subjective health and the proportion of respondents living comfortably. Looking at individual data we find a positive correlation ($r=0.39$, $N: 6914$) between subjective health and feelings of living comfortable among elderly respondents (65-74 years of age).

The first conclusion is that even within Europe the socio-economic conditions for a healthy and active ageing vary strongly. Concepts or ideals about active ageing reflect actually primarily the situation of affluent elderly in affluent societies.

Table 1:

Subjective health und feelings about own economic situation among respondents aged 65-74 in different European countries 2012

Country	Subj. health: %- good/very good	Feelings about economic situation: *		N:
		%-living comfortably	%-difficult situation	
Switzerland	75%	58%	9%	201
Sweden	71%	57%	7%	275
Ireland	71%	34%	16%	285
Netherlands	69%	59%	8%	244
Denmark	64%	71%	2%	264
Belgium	60%	29%	22%	235
Great Britain	59%	49%	7%	307
Finland	51%	23%	9%	334
Germany	49%	38%	11%	495
France	46%	24%	16%	267
Israel	41%	27%	32%	218
Portugal	37%	6%	46%	297
Spain	36%	17%	32%	236
Bulgaria	27%	0	75%	381
Slovakia	26%	4%	60%	226
Czech. Republic	25%	6%	48%	313
Hungary	25%	6%	49%	262
Poland	24%	2%	48%	215
Estonia	21%	4%	42%	310
Lithuania	12%	4%	51%	372
Russia	7%	2%	65%	214

* Feelings about household income nowadays: living comfortably on present income, coping on present income, difficult/very difficult on present income

Source: European Social Survey Round 6 Data (2012). Data file edition 1.0. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway - Data Archive and distributor of ESS data. (own analysis, weighted data)

The ,young old‘ in Switzerland – values and background

The ambiguous term of the ‘young old’ – as well as the development of the concept of a ‘third age’ (Laslett 1989) – indicates changing images and norms regarding later stages of life. In this context many men and women aged 65-74 do not define themselves as being ‘old’ in the classical sense of deficit-oriented images of old age. For this reason surprisingly many of the elderly Swiss respondents identify themselves with post-modern values of having permanently new ideas and the importance of trying new things in life. Comparing the value of having new ideas and undertaking new activities between younger and older age-groups, some age differences can be observed, but these differences are not always very marked (for example among German respondents) (Table 2). To be innovative and adaptive to new ideas are human values that for a majority of Swiss and German respondents (but not for respondents in Poland) seem to remain personally important even after retirement. Newer generations of the ‘young old’ emphasize a pattern of ‘old and innovative’ as a new frame of reference. The lower proportion of elderly finding it important to try new and different things in life indicates that – at least for some men and women – new ideas do not necessarily mean new activities. Detailed analysis shows a strong association between personal identification

with post-modern values and the socio-economic situation; indicating that post-modern life values among the 'young old' are concentrated among the more affluent elderly.

Table 2:

Identification with post-modern values at higher ages in selected European countries 2012

Age-groups:	New ideas**			New activities**		
	25-34	55-64	65-74	25-34	55-64	65-74
Germany	62%	62%	56%	48%	43%	43%
Great Britain	63%	54%	56%	49%	43%	37%
Poland	56%	44%	36%	51%	46%	36%
Sweden	62%	54%	54%	45%	29%	33%
Switzerland	69%	71%	57%	60%	45%	46%

* Important to think new ideas and being creative: %-like me, very much like me

** Important to try new and different things in life: %-like me, very much like me

Source: European Social Survey Round 6 Data (2012). Data file edition 1.0. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway - Data Archive and distributor of ESS data (weighted data)

Table 3

Educational level, subjective health and indicators of psychic well-being among respondents aged 65-74 in selected Swiss regions 1979 and 2011

Region:	Men aged 65-74			Women aged 65-74		
	A	A	B	A	A	B
	1979	2011	2011	1979	2011	2011
N:	542	234	365	470	157	343
Educational attainment:						
- low (without vocational training)	56%	14%	14%	72%	11%	14%
- medium (professional training)	30%	50%	53%	20%	54%	56%
- high (tertiary education)	14%	36%	34%	8%	35%	30%
Subjective health:						
- %-good/very good:	52%	69%	69%	45%	70%	69%
Functional health:						
- %-without restrictions in every-day life	84%	94%	89%	76%	90%	94%
Psychic well-being: %-seldom/never						
- feeling lonely	85%	94%	92%	77%	87%	91%
- feeling tired	68%	76%	77%	49%	63%	68%
- feeling anxious	88%	89%	90%	74%	82%	84%
- feeling sad	87%	93%	94%	76%	84%	89%

Region A= Geneva, Valais Region B = Geneva, Valais, Berne, Basle.

1979: aged 65-74 = birth cohorts 1905-1914, 2011: aged 65-74 = birth cohorts 1937-1946.

Source: own analysis, (data 1979: GUGRISPA 1983, data 2011: NCR Vivre-Leben-Vivere (SNF-Project (CRSIII_129922)), leading researchers: Michel Oris, University of Geneva and Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello, University of Bern,

1979 and 2011: same sampling strategy, same survey method and same questions.

A central societal determinant of changing values among the elderly is the expansion of higher education during the last decades and the ageing baby-boomers are the first generation of men and women profiting from the silent educational revolution that started in the 1960s. Table 3 shows the changing educational levels of persons 65-74 years of age in selected Swiss regions between 1979 and 2011.

The percentage of elderly without vocational training has substantially declined, particularly among women. A very similar development has been observed in Germany (Karl 2012). Higher educational attainment has many long-term effects: Better educated people earn higher wages and higher old-age pensions, resulting in a better health and a higher psychic well-being in old age. The proportion of respondents aged 65-74 in good subjective and functional health has increased as well as the proportion of respondents who say that they are seldom or never lonely, tired, anxious or sad. This is particularly the case among women.

Overall, we find – at least in an affluent society like Switzerland – indications that newer generations of the elderly are better educated, have better health and a higher psychic well-being than earlier generations. This could be a good structural basis for more social activities after retirement.

Selected activities among the ‘young old’ – comparing 1979 and 2011

In the following section we look at the answers to questions on leisure activities among respondents 65-74 years of age in different time-periods. The data presented are based on two standardized surveys using. We use those items where exactly the same questions have been asked in 1979 and 2011. This allows the comparisons of answers over time, at least for some selected activities. However, as the data are based on standardized surveys it is – strictly speaking - not always clear how far changes in the distribution of answers to questions on social, cultural or physical activities really represent changing behaviour or changing norms about correct behaviour. Social perception and media discussions regarding active ageing have a strong normative character and answers to questions can be influenced by normative expectations. For this reason the data presented are only a first step in understanding trends in active ageing.

Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents who answered ‘never’ when asked about specific leisure activities by gender in 1979 and 2011. We compare activities over more than thirty years respectively two totally different birth cohorts of respondents.

Overall, the proportion of respondents who explicitly did not take part in the activities mentioned has decreased in the last three decades. The percentage of elderly persons never visiting (or not admitting to visiting) a restaurant, pub, tea-room or coffee-house has substantially decreased. Going out and eating and drinking out has become part of active ageing, also for older women. While 1979 primarily men visited a bistro/pub, in 2011 the gender differences are small and statistically insignificant. Social games (card games etc.) too have become more popular among the elderly (even when the proportion of non-gamers remains large).

The percentage never visiting a concert, theatre or cinema has declined too (even as television became more widespread). A detailed analysis indicates that primarily elderly respondents with tertiary education are culturally interested. The association between cultural activities and educational level is particularly strong among men. Looking at active cultural activities (painting, drawing etc.) the trend is less clear. Even today a large majority of the ‘young old’

do not take up creative activities after retirement. In correspondence to concepts of continuity primarily persons culturally active in earlier life stages are culturally active at higher ages. The same pattern of continuity is true for visiting conferences or taking educational courses in later life. The proportion of elderly continuing education has increased, but it is still a minority of the elderly population. We find indications for a more active, outgoing life-style of the elderly population in Switzerland, but looking at active cultural activities or life-long learning, the culturally active retirees remain a minority (concentrated among educated persons who are culturally interested throughout their life).

Table 4

Percentage of non-active for selected leisure activities among respondents aged 65-74 by gender 1979 and 2011

%-answers: never

		Region A 1979		Region B 2011	
		65-69	70-74	65-69	70-74
Women	N:	242	228	178	187
Men	N:	319	223	198	179
Visiting a bistro, restaurant, tea-room etc.					
	Women	69%	78%	15%	10%
	Men	40%	45%	11%	14%
Social games (card games, chess etc.)					
	Women	78%	82%	43%	47%
	Men	78%	77%	53%	46%
Going to concert, theatre, cinema,					
	Women	67%	71%	31%	31%
	Men	68%	70%	49%	45%
Artistic activities (painting, drawing etc.)					
	Women	89%	93%	73%	74%
	Men	82%	86%	84%	83%
Visiting a conference, educational courses					
	Women	88%	87%	60%	67%
	Men	93%	87%	66%	74%

Region A= Geneva und Valais, Region B = Geneva, Valais, Berne, Basle.

1979: aged 65-74- = birth cohorts 1905-1914, 2011: aged 65-74 = birth cohorts 1937-1946.

Possible answers: never, once per year, once per month, weekly, every day/nearly every day.

Source: see Table 3.

Table 5 presents information about sporting activities of elderly respondents aged 65-74 by gender for 1979 and 2011. Presented are the proportions of respondents giving the answers 'at least once a week/ every day' when asked about sporting activities. As regular sporting activities are in modern society defined as major determinant for a long healthy life-expectancy the answers in 2011 can also reflect normative dimensions (resulting in an overestimation of the regularity of sporting activities). When active ageing becomes a social norm, answers to survey questions can reflect both factual behaviour and normative ideals.

Nonetheless, the data give some indications that today more women and men aged 65-74 are regularly physically active (or at least normatively oriented towards regular physical

activities). In 1979 walking – with or without walking-stick – was the preferred and often only regular physical activity of the elderly. In 2011 more women and men mentioned gymnastics, structured physical activities or other sporting activities. The comparison 1979-2011 indicates a trend toward physically active ageing among an increasing proportion of the elderly.

Table 5:

Sporting activities of respondents aged 65-74 by gender 1979 and 2011

%-answering ,at least once a week/every day

		Region A 1979		Region B 2011	
		65-69	70-74	65-69	70-74
Women	N:	242	228	178	187
Men	N:	319	223	198	179
Walking (outside of shopping)					
Women		78%	61%	80%	81%
Men		78%	75%	77%	77%
Gymnastics, physical exercises					
Women		33%	26%	60%	51%
Men		25%	22%	41%	42%
Sporting activities (besides gymnastics)					
Women		10%	4%	25%	29%
Men		18%	13%	24%	25%

Region A= Geneva und Valais, Region B = Geneva, Valais, Berne, Basle.

1979: aged 65-74- = birth cohorts 1905-1914, 2011: aged 65-74 = birth cohorts 1937-1946.

Possible answers: never, once per year, once per month, weekly, every day/nearly every day.

Source: see Table 3

Table 6

Physical activities among elderly persons in Switzerland 2002 and 2012

		Persons living in private households					
		Men			Women		
		55-64	65-74	75+	55-64	65-74	75+
Physically active	2002	61%	69%	51%	57%	50%	34%
	2012	70%	82%	64%	68%	71%	50%
Physically inactive	2002	20%	21%	37%	23%	31%	50%
	2012	12%	7%	23%	13%	13%	33%

Physically active: at least 150 minutes per week of moderate physical activity or at least twice a week intensive physical activity.

Physically inactive: less than 30 minutes per week moderate physical activity and less than once per week intensive physical activity.

Third category (not shown): 30 to 149 minutes per week moderate physical activity or at least once a week intensive physical activity

Source: Swiss micro census on health and health behaviour 2002 and 2012 (weighted data)

This trend toward a physically active ageing is supported by more elaborated data from the Swiss micro-census on health and health behaviour: Between 2002 and 2012 the percentage of physically active elderly has increased and the proportions of physically inactive elderly show declining values, even at higher ages (Table 6).

The data described so far give strong indication that forms of active ageing have become more widespread, particularly regarding physical activity, mobility and social contacts (but less regarding cultural activities). Some forms of activities (like regular physical exercises, drinking and eating out) are observed among a majority of elderly persons. Other forms of activities (visiting conferences, artistic activities) represent still minority interests.

Additional data on activities patterns among the ‘young old’ from 1999 to 2013

Additional information on social activities among the ‘young old’ in Switzerland can be gained by analysing survey data from the Swiss Household Panel (a national survey started in 1999 and continued annually). In table 7 we look at the changes in selected activities between 1999 and 2013 among respondents 65-74 years of age and of respondents 55-64 years of age. As the younger age-group is predominately still working and the older age-group predominately retired, we gain first indications how far retirement is related with changes of leisure activities or not.¹

The comparison of activities from 1999 to 2013 supports the earlier made observation of a trend towards a more active lifestyle among new generations of older men and women: Meeting friends has become slightly more common as well as drinking or eating out. Being physical active too has become more widespread, but not attending sporting events (an activity primarily widespread among men). To play a musical instrument or singing at higher ages are still of interests for only a minority but the proportion of culturally active elderly has increased (and concepts of creative ageing are underlining this trend). Slightly less popular became “going to the cinema”, probably because home entertainment gained in importance.

When we compare the activities patterns of respondents aged 55-64 (mostly still working) and respondents aged 65-74 (mostly retired) we observe not big changes in leisure activities, indicating that retirement does not have a major effect on activity patterns. This is due to the fact that activity patterns are strongly related to personal interests and social conditions and less to the time budget. As most of the 65-74-years old in Switzerland profit from a good subjective health, no strong health effects can be observed. The chronological age – at least until the age 74 – is in an affluent society with extended healthy life expectancy no strong determinant of activity patterns after retirement. Much more important are cohort effects (different generations with different leisure and life interests) and the social milieu (particularly regarding cultural activities).

¹ A more elaborated analysis of the data is in progress to look at continuity or changes of leisure activities after retirement for different social groups of men and women (longitudinal approach).

Table 7:

Social, cultural and sporting activities of Swiss persons aged 55-74 in 1999 and 2013

A: % answers: „every day or at least once a week; B: % answers: less than once a month/never

	Age group	A		B	
		55-64	65-74	55-64	65-74
Meeting friends					
	1999	52%	51%	14%	15%
	2013	59%	61%	8%	7%
Visiting a pub, bar, restaurant					
	1999	36%	40%	34%	32%
	2013	52%	52%	14%	18%
Visiting a cinema/going to the movies					
	1999	2%	2%	85%	91%
	2013	2%	2%	76%	80%
Attending sporting events					
	1999	6%	5%	82%	86%
	2013	5%	3%	78%	84%
Doing sport/sporting activities					
	1999	54%	46%	41%	50%
	2013	59%	50%	36%	46%
Playing a musical instrument/singing					
	1999	13%	10%	84%	87%
	2013	20%	20%	76%	76%
Do it yourself, gardening					
	1999	67%	69%	21%	21%
	2013	63%	65%	23%	24%

Source: Swiss Household Panel Survey (weighted data, own analysis). N: 55-64 J.: 1999: 1211, 2013: 1122; 65-74 J.: 1999: 827, 2013: 823

Concluding remarks

The third age in Switzerland is characterized by rapid social changes and younger generations of the elderly show higher levels of physical, social and cultural activities. The ‘young old’ of today define themselves more often as healthy and physically active than previous generations. They are also socially and culturally more active than earlier generations even considering the fact that active cultural activities (like visiting conferences or courses, playing a musical instrument etc.) are still activities of a selected minority of elderly. Central determinants of the trend towards an active ageing in Switzerland are good health and high economic security after retirement. For this reason processes of active ageing are primarily observed among healthy and affluent elderly within affluent European countries.

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