

EUROPEAN STUDY OF ADULT WELL-BEING

SELF RESOURCES IN ADVANCED AND OLD AGE

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The research project “Ageing Well: A European Study of Adult Well-Being” (ESAW) aims at building a European socio-cultural model able to identify which main factors, along with personal characteristics and culture, exert a direct causal contribution to the outcome variable *ageing well*. The components included in the study are the following five: physical health and functional status; self resources; life activity; material security; and social support. The project has been carried out in 2002-2003 in 6 European countries (Austria, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom). It is based on individual interviews administered by means of a structured questionnaire to national samples of 1,800-2,000 non institutionalised subjects (e.g. not hospitalised nor in long term care facilities), aged 50-90, in each of the involved countries.

In the psychological section, the ESAW project focuses on the role of the “self” as a resource for a subjectively good old age. While modern theories of life-span psychology no longer view ageing as a necessarily negative process consisting exclusively of losses, it is still seen as the time of life that involves most losses, and a time in which losses outweigh gains.

How do older people manage to do so well emotionally in the face of so many difficulties? From a psychological perspective, the answer lies, in part at least, with the protective functions of the self, that is, in the way in which older people interpret and deal with the experience of ageing and its challenges. Thus, the various facets of the self and the individual’s belief system constitute an

important resource that older people draw upon when facing challenges in other domains.

ESAW assessed self-esteem, locus-of-control, resilience and mental health of respondents. These areas were evaluated by established self-report instruments often used in international research agendas.

Self-esteem was assessed by the widely used measure of global self-esteem designed by Rosenberg.

Control was assessed by the Spheres of Control Scale developed by Paulhus.

Resilience was assessed by the Resilience Scale by Wagnild and Young.

ESAW also used the **Mental health** scale from the Older Americans' Resources and Services Multidimensional Functional Assessment.

The report considers the effect of the variables: country, age, gender, rural or urban residence, ethnicity, household composition and socio-economic status on the aforementioned self-resource

variables. Significant differences and interactions are reported.

Key results:

There are both significant differences between countries and significant interactions of other variables with country for most of the variables studied.





Significant differences between **age** groups, with resource levels decreasing with increasing age, were found somewhat more often than would have been expected, given the general stability of self-resources in old age reported in the literature. However, the differences found in the ESAW study were generally small. Inconsistent findings between studies might be due to sample size, with the ESAW sample characterized by a solid statistical power.




Gender differences were significant for self esteem, personal control, interpersonal control, socio-political control, and mental health, with men showing higher levels than women in each of these scales. As with age groups, the mean


differences for gender are generally small. These findings, while being in agreement with the literature, are especially interesting in light of the fact that the ESAW findings do not reveal any gender difference for resilience.

 Significant differences between individuals living in **rural and urban** areas were found for sociopolitical control (with people from urban environments showing higher levels of sociopolitical control than people living in rural areas), resilience and mental health (with people from rural areas having higher levels of resilience and enjoying better mental health than people from urban areas). Significant interactions of rural/urban area between ESAW nations were found for all variables except personal control and resilience.

 Differences between **ethnic groups** were significant only for mental health. In all cases, individuals from the national majority reported better levels of mental health than, individuals from non-European countries. Individuals from other European

countries were in between. These findings may be related to long-lasting cultural adaptation and assimilation issues. A significant interaction was found between ethnicity and country on mental health; the possibility that these may be attributable to differences in the composition and circumstances of non-Europeans in the participating countries should be considered.

 **Household composition** was a general predictor of self-resources, with significant differences in self esteem, personal control, interpersonal control, and mental health. In all of these scales, individuals living alone reported lower levels than individuals living with others. This effect may be related to the more general gender effect, as more women than men are living alone in old age due to the lower life expectancy for men.

 There were significant differences related to **working status** in all self resources scales with working individuals showing

higher levels of self resources than non-working individuals. Working status may actually be a very interesting variable in explaining age differences, as the changes in life situation usually associated with old age are highly associated with retirement. Before retiring, individuals may not be “feeling old” at all.

Policy implications:

The analyses of a range of self resources showed that high levels correlated with

good self-expressed well-being. It can then be questioned, by which set of specific competencies those who have high levels of self resources are characterised. Once evidence on this topic is established, promotion of older people’s inter- and intrapersonal competences, enabling them to strengthen and maintain good levels of self resources might be addressed through various prevention strategies.

Other documents in the European Study of Adult Well-Being Report Summary Series:

- No 1. Social Support Resources
- No 2. Life Activities
- No 3. Physical Health and Functional Status
- No 5. Material Security
- No 6. European Model of Ageing Well

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