



Research Paper

Gerontopsychology - from studies to science

TeodorGergov

Department of Psychology, South-west University "Neophyte Rilski" - Blagoevgrad, 66, Ivan MihaylovStr,
Bulgaria

ABSTRACT: This article is an attempt to show, in a succinct and systematic manner, the common conceptions regarding the mental status of people during old age. Psychological changes related to ageing have attracted the interest of people since times immemorial. This interest is due to people's inclination to have a thorough explanation of the psychological phenomena in the area of ontogenesis, as well as due to the yearning to keep old age at bay and to achieve long life. The article presents a retrospective analysis of the study of ageing and old age over time, along with a review of its gradual transformation into a narrow scientific field. It also includes some inferred opinions about the future development of gerontopsychology and its social role.

KEYWORDS: old age; ageing; gerontopsychology; development of knowledge; gerontogenesis

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I. INTRODUCTION

Old age is what lies ahead of all of us, and, as such, it deserves to be paid attention to. The last stages of ontogenesis are probably the most neglected from a scientific perspective. This is because we have developed an attitude to consider aging and old age as a tedious and not very perspective stage of human life. The traditional view on this forms ideas and expectations for the old age as an inevitable reality full of worries and not many hopes [1].

As population gets older every day, the topics dealing with questions related to the mind and the personality of old people are getting more and more relevant. The science that has to give answers to these questions is gerontopsychology (the psychology of aging). Its focus is the psychological condition and behaviour of a person during the ontogenesis - from the 60th year until death. It is a relatively new scientific area of study, closely connected to gerontology and psychology, the foundations of which can be traced back to the ancient thinkers' notions of aging and old age. The study of gerontology is by necessity interdisciplinary. Many areas of the biological sciences, together with almost all disciplines of the social and behaviouristic studies, are related to ageing and old people.

II. METHODS

An extensive analysis of the literary sources dealing with the problem from the last several decades has been made. Articles, papers and books showing the development of gerontology were manually checked and compared. A search by keywords and phrases was done in the specialized databases. The information received was interpreted and structured according to meaning and chronological order.

Origin and development

Ageing and old age are biologically determined in the historical development of the Homo sapiens species and the interaction of multi-sided social, cultural and ecological factors is related to them. What logically follows from this biological determination of the categories in question is the idea that their study has co-occurred with the origin of medicine. This study is called gerontology (from the Greek words gerontos - old person and logos - science) and it treats the patterns and mechanisms of aging and old age [2].

The first descriptions of aging and its co-occurring diseases can be traced back to the written works of the doctors from the Hippocrates' school. (Hippocrates - 460- 377 BC). They claim that diseases in old people do not show many symptoms, there is no high temperature, no manifest reactions, and they seem to happen as if in the background but for a long period of time and with a tendency to develop into chronic ones. At that time the well-developed regime of old people built on the principle 'moderation in everything' gains popularity -

with progressive decrease of the quantity of consumed food, preservation of one's habits and the gradual withdrawal from active work [3,4].

Along with the scientific knowledge that was formed during that period, there are some practices that are connected most of all with occultism and metaphysics. It was a frequent sight to see travelling quacks, magicians or ordinary charlatans who offered elixirs of youth, stones of immortality, and all kinds of objects and rituals promising eternal youthfulness, longevity and even immortality [5,6].

The further examination of the processes of aging is connected to the development of clinical medicine that focuses on the regime of orthobiosis (the study of the wise and healthy lifestyle) of the persons in old age. Galen and his school were the first to popularize the view that old age was a natural process. They introduce the term *discrasia* to encompass all signs of old age, such as loss of warmth and humidity of tissues, something that has an effect on many vital processes. Galen first made a distinction between normal and premature aging which he calls *senium ex morbo*. He believed that any illness that has not been cured in a timely manner could lead to premature aging. His followers and he developed a program for the diet of the aging person to slow down this process and to alleviate its symptoms. Later it grew into a new area of study, the study of old age called *gerocomia*. It focuses on the diet and the need for active movements and rules for personal hygiene. At the same time, the clinical status of the most frequent diseases in old age was described.

During the Middle Ages the views of this school laid the foundations for the later development of the study called *gerocomia*. A significant contribution for its development has the representative of the Arab school of medicine Abu Ali IbnSina (Avicenna). His school and he further developed in their essays Galen's notions about the lifestyle of old people. The accent is once again on the eating plan and the food contents, on the need for movement, massage, horse riding, good hygiene habits, and others.[7]

III. FROM STUDIES TO SCIENCE

G. Stoynev [2] summarises the future development of the study of old age and aging. In 1489 the first systematised paper on the known facts about aging was issued under the name *Gerontokomia* by G. Zerbi. This paper differed from the other papers from that time as it elaborately analysed the genesis of old age, the physiological and the psychological changes that take place within a person. It puts accent on the need for old people to live in the family because loneliness is one of the main reasons for premature aging.

The next work of significant value in this field of study is that done by J. Floyer. In 1724 he issued the first scientific paper in England on this topic, entitled *Gerocomics Medicine*. It put forward the view that aging is a process of changing chemical properties resulting from the disbalance of body fluids (*cacochemistry*). The process of aging of each person is unique depending on its biological constitution. Its slowing down must be individualised because there are only some general orthobiosis principles and a personalised program has to be made for each person.

In 1796 H. Hufeland - the founder of the German Geriatrics printed his popular essay *The Art of Prolonging Human Life*. It underwent several issues under the name *Macrobiotics*, and the predominant part of its content focuses on the factors which define the length of life. Hufeland concludes that emotions and feelings constitute an integral part of the process of aging. He opines that fear, the feeling of helplessness and the lack of perspectives in life, irresoluteness, suffering, despondency, sadness and the envy, hatred and even stinginess accelerate the coming of old age [8].

The new period in the development of gerontology, which begins as far back in time as the second half of the eighteenth century with the development of the fundamental sciences, continues its development in the nineteenth century. The times of observations and experiments have come. Understanding diseases and health can no longer be based only on humoral factors. The clinical observation requires a re-evaluation of the connection between the morphological changes and the clinical syndromes. Common signs of aging on the level of organs are the anatomical changes in the blood vessels, changes in the structure of the joints and the spinal cord, as well as organ atrophy. In fact, the clinical area of study is the dominant one in gerontology in Germany, France, England and Russia in the whole of the nineteenth century. The influence of the Russian School, and that of S. Botkin in particular, is great during that period. His research provides enough information to differentiate between the terms normal aging and pathological aging. These terms are understood as terminal criteria in aging, and their development is predetermined by a series of factors [9].

All in all, the XX century focuses on the importance of the nervous system for the processes of aging. As far back as the 20s M. Milman points out its key role in the genesis of aging. I. Pavlov also reveals the importance of the central nervous system and, in particular, the changes in the main cortex functions of the brain. It was experimentally proved that old age leads to changes in the mobility and the intensity of the processes of stimulation and retention happening in the brain [7].

All these facts provoke interest in the study of aging and old age from a psychological perspective, which gradually leads to the establishing of a new scientific discipline called gerontopsychology (psychology of aging). It focuses on studying the changes in the psychological phenomena and the behaviouristic models in old

people. I. Petrov [10] traces the historical development of gerontopsychology in great detail. Its founder is considered to be S. Hall who in 1922 issued the first gerontopsychology book entitled *The Second Half of Life*. The scientific research during that time were directed mainly at the sensory and cognitive functions. Later on, a preferred area of study seemed to be the psychomotor domain of research where gerontopsychologists developed further the psychometric approach introduced by F. Galton. The series of successes achieved in the area influenced the general study of the psychomotor processes in psychology. Other important fields in which gerontopsychological studies concentrate are the individual differences, the progression of age and the decrease of the intellectual abilities and memory.

Social-psychology studies and theories, which were significantly developed from the 30s of the XX century, influenced gerontopsychology as well, although only in certain areas like adaptation, role changes and interests. These issues are studied and developed in the University of Chicago by E. Burgess, R. Havighurst, W. Henry, B. Neugarten and others. B. Ananiev and M. Alexandrova are one of the gerontopsychology's pioneers from the Russian school. Ananiev made the first attempts to include gerontopsychology in the classification of psychology, and Alexandrova made the first complex study of old age in the former Soviet Union. The interest in personality changes and the personality theory of aging increases but the approach in this area remains to a great degree eclectic.

If one attempts to trace the development of gerontology in Bulgaria, one will find its roots in the medical literature from the Bulgarian National Revival. Eminent doctors and enlighteners, among who are P. Beron, I. Bogorov, D. Mollov, H. Stamboliyski, and others, dedicate a series of articles to the issues of aging and longevity. Following the Liberation of Bulgaria, the study of the longevity phenomenon interested many people. A. Zlatarov's monography *Essays on the Philosophy of Medicine* that was issued in 1911 is thought to be the first more detailed description of the study of old age in Bulgaria. M. Popov [11,2] is another person famous for his experimental study on the age-related slowing down of the cell metabolism and the ways to stimulate it. In the last few decades, some elaborate studies on the issues of aging and old age in Bulgaria were done by the researchers I. Petrov, G. Stoynev, S. Vizev, G. Iolov, D. Gradev, N. Alexandrova, L. Georgiev, P. Balkanska, and others.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

It has become obvious that the knowledge of the mind in the last stages of life has gone through a long and complex evolutionary road. Many factors and influences from various scientific areas converge in it. This is a prerequisite for its variety and significance.

The development of gerontopsychology continues even today, in the new millennium. As a last section of the age psychology, it is expected to answer the needs of the more and more aging population around the world. Apart from this demographic fact, the interest in gerontopsychology is due to a number of other considerations which can generally be put in the following three categories:

Humane - the human life is a gift, it is unique and its good and fruitful experience would be in the interest of the person and the society. Centenarians can serve as an example for growing-ups.

Social - the prolonged life demands a re-evaluation of the social role of the old person, of his ability to work, of his activity and social occupation.

Scientific - the well-studied inner world of the old person is, ontogenetically, an imperative in the whole explanation of the mind.

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