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Ageing and Society

Guido Amoretti PhD

Department of Education Sciences [DISFOR]

University of Genoa



DISFOR

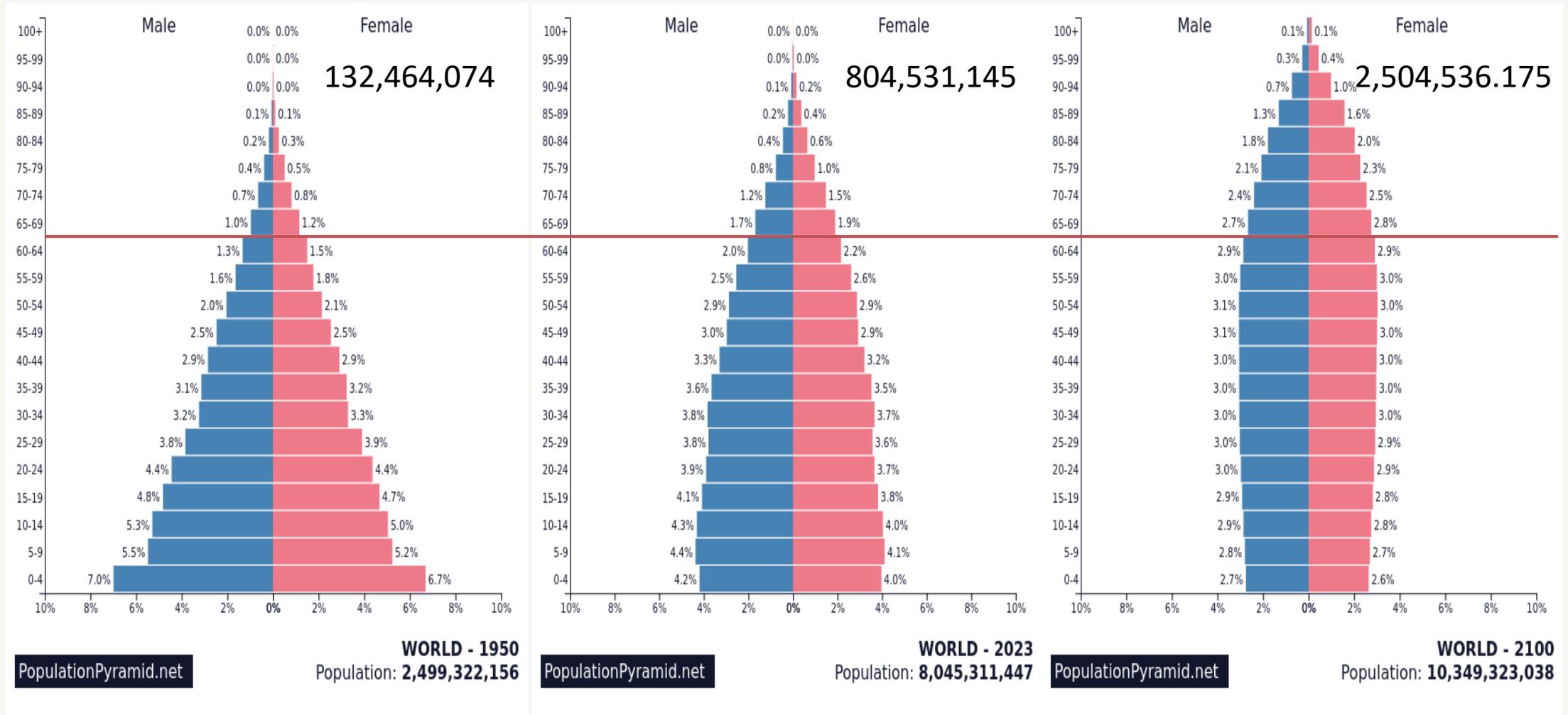


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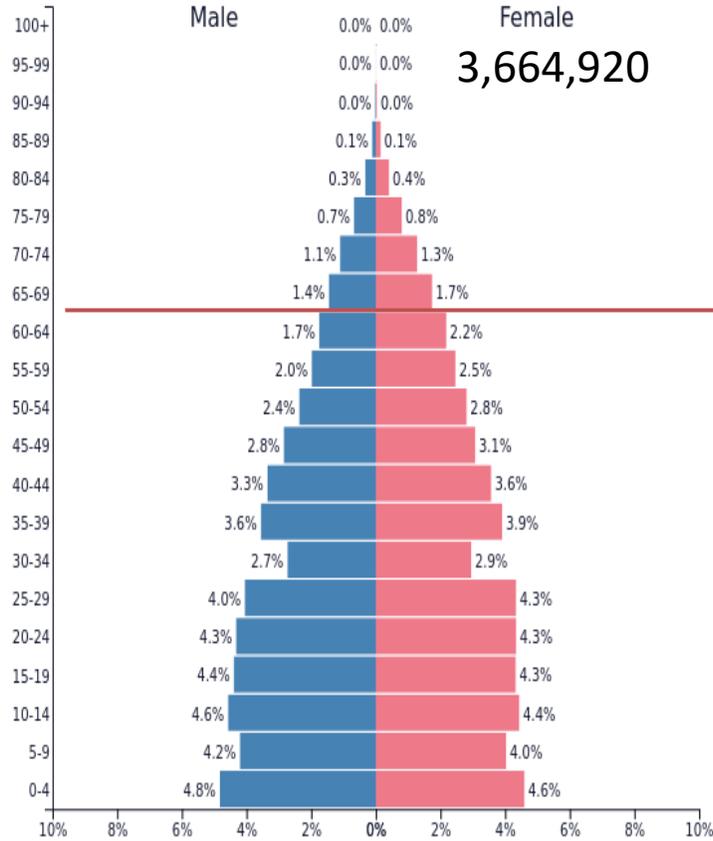
What are we going to talk about?

- demographic changes: in the World, in Italy in Ukraine
- the evolving concept of old age
- the needs of the elderly
- the challenge of well-being for the whole population and the elderly
- well-being, health and active ageing: what role for universities?
- how can ageism be countered?

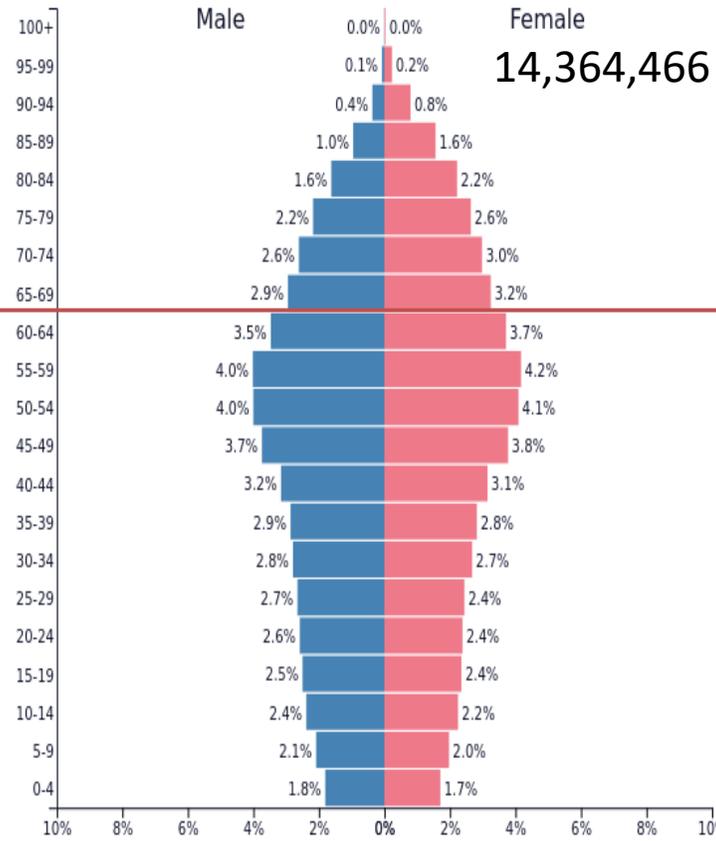
World's Pyramid of life: 1950 vs 2023 vs 2100



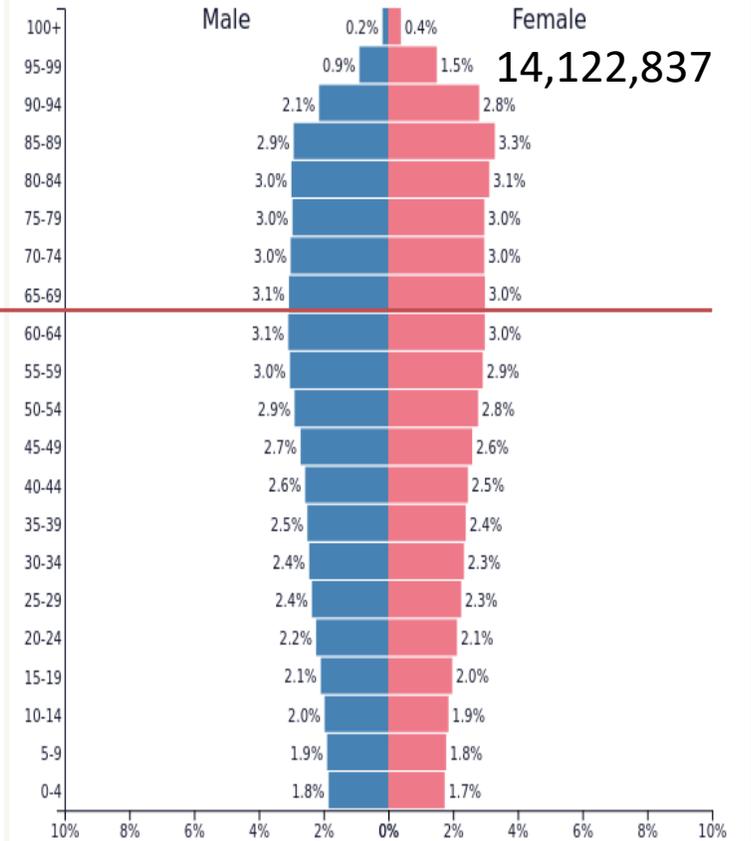
Italy's Pyramid of life: 1950 vs 2023 vs 2100



PopulationPyramid.net
Italy - 1950
 Population: **46,391,937**

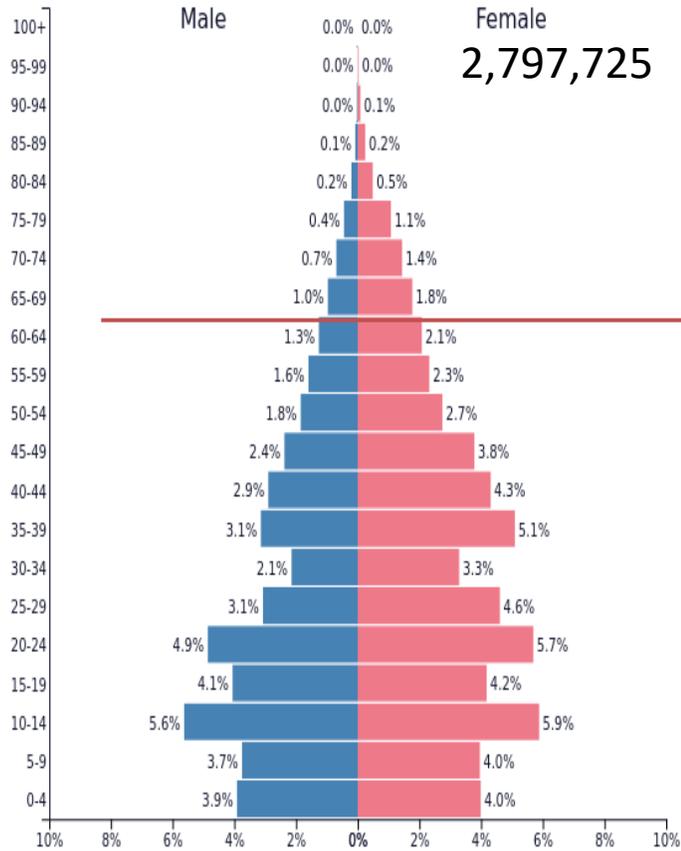


PopulationPyramid.net
Italy - 2023
 Population: **58,870,762**



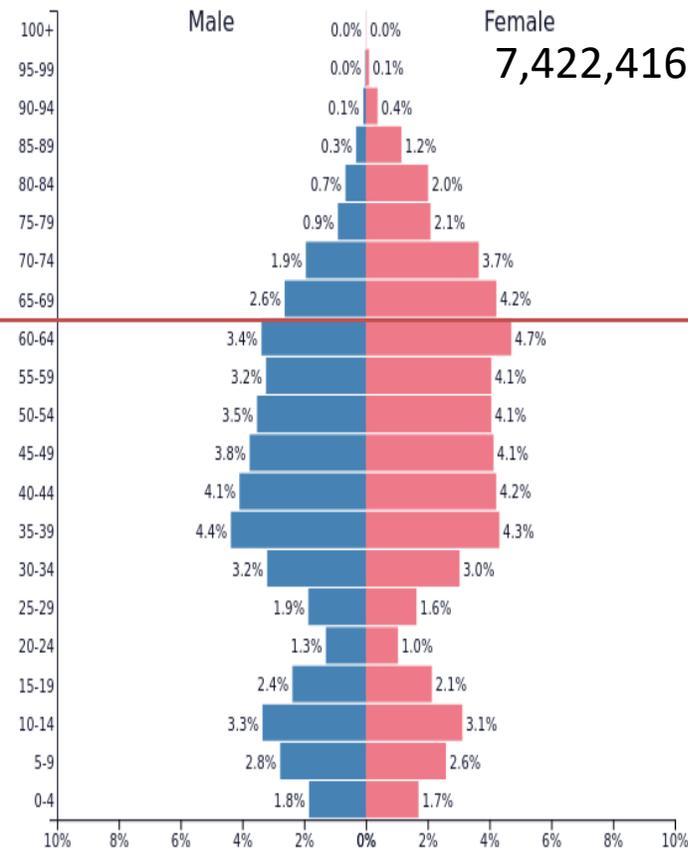
PopulationPyramid.net
Italy - 2100
 Population: **36,874,247**

Ukraine's Pyramid of life: 1950 vs 2023 vs 2100



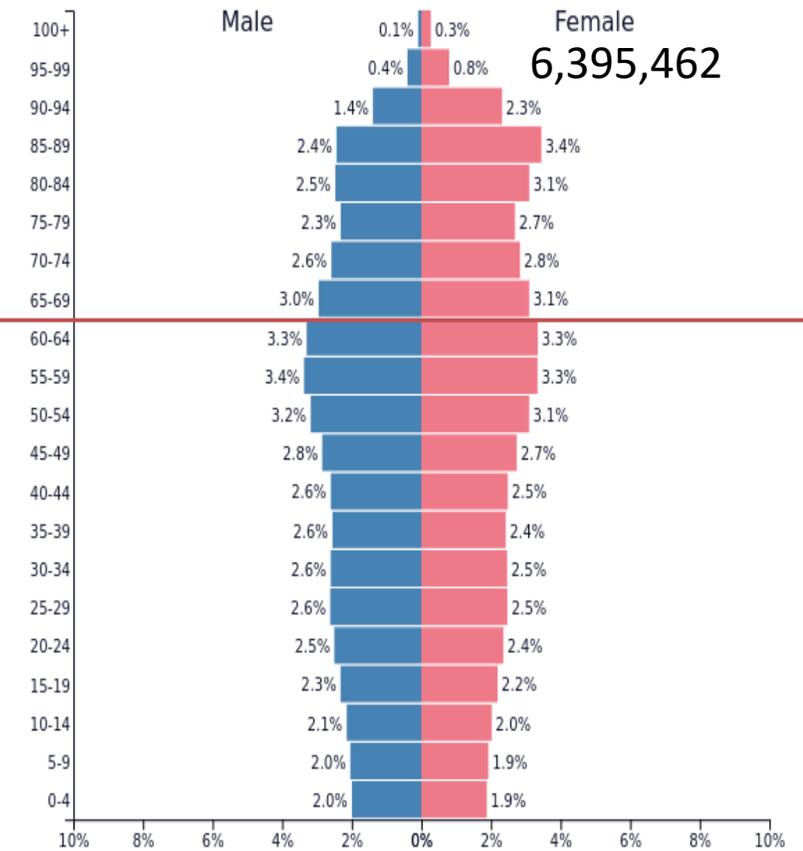
Ukraine - 1950
Population: 37,302,996

PopulationPyramid.net



Ukraine - 2023
Population: 36,744,633

PopulationPyramid.net



Ukraine - 2100
Population: 20,432,787

PopulationPyramid.net

Causes of demographic changes

- The increase in the elderly population is due:
 - to improved living conditions
 - to the greater diffusion of head medical aids
 - to discoveries in the medical - health field that make it possible to prevent those pathologies that had an impact on early mortality
- The decrease in population in some countries would instead be due to:
 - by a lower birth rate, the causes of which are to be sought in a change of mentality and values. The availability of conditions of well-being, at least in some countries, ends up favouring a self-centred attitude that aims to satisfy one's own needs as an individual first and foremost, not placing reproduction as the main purpose and taking it into consideration by evaluating its positive and negative aspects in both economic and social terms
 - by the emigration phenomenon

The evolving concept of old age (1)

- As we have seen, the phenomenon of an ageing population is relatively recent and coincides with the phase of economic recovery and driven development following the end of the Second World War: this is at least as far as the so-called advanced developing countries are concerned.
- The transition from a social organisation based on the extended family to one centred on the mononuclear family has brought about a change in the perception of the elderly
- While previously those leaving to reach old age were regarded as repositories of knowledge still largely handed down orally, they have subsequently been experienced more as a problem than a resource. In societies with industrial development, the pace of work and the need to continually update in order to be able to perform have led to a progressive marginalisation of the elderly.

The evolving concept of old age (2)

- It is in this context that the theory of disengagement was born [Cumming, Henry, 1961].
- Based on the results of a longitudinal, cross-sectional study of 700 ss between the ages of 40 and 90 conducted in the 1950s [Kansas City Study of Adult Life] claimed that ageing was accompanied by gradual, inevitable and irreversible tendency to withdraw and abandon one's social roles and activities in preparation for the final detachment that occurs with death.
- This approach on the one hand promoted old age as a sad and ugly period that once reached did not allow people to be an active part of society in any way, on the other hand it fostered the idea of the ghettoisation of the elderly as a burden on society.

The evolving concept of old age (3)

- In 1969, the American psychiatrist and geriatrician Robert Butler coined the term ageism. Like other forms of prejudice, such as racism and sexism, ageism consists in devaluing an individual, in this case because of his or her age and, in particular - but not exclusively - older people, on the basis of a purely age-related criterion.
- In the same period, the activity theory, which emerged in the early post-war period [Havighurst, 1945], became the antagonist of the theory of disengagement.
- We will return to both the concept of ageism and the concept of activity towards the end of this talk, since both these concepts are part of the World Health Organisation's strategies on ageing.

The needs of the elderly (1)

- Due to increased life expectancy, the elderly can enjoy a long period of psycho-physical well-being. Consequently, the needs of the elderly are extremely varied and not only of a socio-medical nature.
- The main ones are:
 - to remain intellectually active;
 - to be useful for the community;
 - to have a new social identity;
 - to have places of aggregation;
 - to have economic support;
 - have services that allow them to live in their own homes;
 - have health care
 - have reception facilities for periods of non-self-sufficiency

The needs of the elderly (2)

- The needs listed above involve preventive interventions and the maintenance of dedicated long-term care facilities. The latter entail considerable economic resources, so investing in preventive activities, which aim to minimise periods of non-self-sufficiency, may in perspective help to limit the amount of economic resources to be allocated.
- If we consider that, for example, a month's stay in an assisted-living facility in Italy costs more than € 3,000.00, which is only partially covered by the national health system, we can easily understand how much a preventive policy that minimises periods of non-self-sufficiency is worth in economic terms.

The challenge of well-being for the whole population and the elderly

- The attainment of well-being, understood as mental well-being, by the population and in particular the elderly is one of the goals of the W.H.O.
- Given the great differences in the living and social conditions of different populations, this is a very ambitious goal. Nevertheless, at least in advanced developing nations, it is among the stated goals of governments and apparatuses concerned with the health of the population.
- Certainly, achieving mental well-being is one of the factors that can contribute to a longer life, but the variables that influence it are many and make the challenge very difficult.

Well-being, health and active ageing: what role for universities? (1)

- Several studies have shown the importance of well-being and active ageing on the health of individuals.
- Well-being is a psychological dimension, not objective but subjective, that influences the state of mind, the approach to life and keeps stress at bay.
- Active ageing has beneficial effects both on the physical side, in that it provides tonicity and performance to our bodies, and on the neurophysiological side, where keeping one's brain in constant training seems to slow down the ageing process by prolonging the state of self-sufficiency that allows the elderly to continue living a full life, even if limited by the general ageing process. Nor should we forget how much feeling that we are still an active part of the world around us exerts a protective function, acting particularly on our moods, since we cannot forget how widespread depression is among the elderly.

Well-being, health and active ageing: what role for universities? (2)

- All actions aimed at promoting well-being and active ageing thus end up affecting the health status of the elderly population.
- We have already emphasised how onerous it is for a society to have to care for a large proportion of the population with health needs. Consequently, everything that can help maintain a good general state of health, apart from particularly serious illnesses, serves to prolong a person's period of self-sufficiency by reducing the period of non-self-sufficiency to which many elderly people are at risk of falling.
- And this translates into savings for the national health system.

Well-being, health and active ageing: what role for universities? (3)

- Being able to behave in a way that can be traced back to the concept of active ageing depends on a number of factors.
- It certainly counts having cultivated interests during one's lifetime other than the work one has done. The sudden quota of free time that retirees have to manage can be usefully filled by these interests to which one can devote much more time than was possible during one's working life.
- The attitude that a person may develop towards the idea of no longer being productive in terms of work can also influence whether active ageing is greater or lesser.
- For those who feel inclined to socially useful activities there is the world of volunteering, which offers the possibility of using one's time for the benefit of others.

Well-being, health and active ageing: what role for universities? (4)

- It has been observed in many quarters that the level of education of persons is a protective factor against ageing. Of course, there are very trivial explanations for this: those who have been educated usually have done work that is not physically stressful and have reached an economic level that allows them to live well, with positive consequences for their health. But it has also been shown that having used one's mental resources for work purposes counteracts the processes of cerebral ageing to which we are exposed from the moment of birth.
- Reading books solving puzzle games and broadening one's knowledge to satisfy one's curiosity are possible actions for each of us that depend to a large extent on possessing a higher level of instruction. This represents an additional advantage for those who have had the opportunity to study, but it should make us reflect on the possibility of offering opportunities for cultural/intellectual activities to those who have not had this opportunity and who are at greater risk of cognitive impairment.

Well-being, health and active ageing: what role for universities? (5)

- This is the field in which universities can play a decisive role, in terms of the third mission, by offering opportunities for cultural and intellectual growth to those who wish to acquire or implement knowledge and skills in areas that have already been explored or are completely new.
- The so-called “universities of the third age” deal precisely with this type of education not only through traditional courses that increase the knowledge of elderly students but also by offering learning paths in innovative fields such as IT and in the area of foreign languages.
- On the importance of studying throughout life, not only at a young age, let me borrow the words of Umberto Eco. The world-renowned intellectual and philosopher expressed universal concepts during a speech at the University of Bologna in 2009, addressing students directly: 'Whatever the mass media are dealing with today, the university dealt with twenty years ago, and what the university deals with today will be reported by the mass media in twenty years' time. To attend university well is to have a twenty-year head start.' "It is the same reason," he added, "that knowing how to read lengthens one's life. He who does not read has only his life, which, I assure you, is very little. Instead, when we die, we will remember having crossed the Rubicon with Caesar, fought at Waterloo with Napoleon, travelled with Gulliver and met dwarfs and giants. A small compensation for the lack of immortality'.

Well-being, health and active ageing: what role for universities? (6)

- In Italy, too, the phenomenon is particularly widespread. It began in the 1970s with the UNITRE experience and later saw the emergence of the system of Popular universities linked to trade unions for pensioners and finally, it was characterised by the entry of many of the Italian universities that offered high quality training courses delivered by the same teachers who teach the younger generations.
- Even the University of Genoa has a specific structure called UNIGE Senior that offers courses relating to the various disciplines taught in the different courses of study aimed at people who have passed a certain age (more than 45 years). It is possible to follow individual courses and participate in cultural events organised by the university, but also to obtain qualifications at the end of a course of study with a proclamation. With respect to this desire to fill cultural gaps and satisfy one's curiosity, however, I would like to point out that more and more students over the age of 60 are sitting in their desks together with 20-year-olds following the normal courses offered by the university, at the end of which they obtain a degree that is absolutely identical to that of the young students and someone obtain the second or the third diploma of the life.

How can ageism be countered? (1)

- We have seen that universities, through the universities of the third age, fulfil their third mission function by fostering the dissemination of knowledge among older people and promoting active ageing with the possible positive effects on cognitive performance, psychological well-being and general health conditions.
- However, the third mission function inherent to the third age of universities does not end here.
- We have previously mentioned the changes in attitudes towards the third age that have taken place over the years. Although the idea of an active third age that is still able to contribute to the wellbeing of the community is sufficiently accepted at a rational level, attitudes and behaviour that can be traced back to the phenomenon of ageism are unfortunately still widespread.

How can ageism be countered?(2)

- Ageism is an integral part of the WHO Strategy and Action Plan for Healthy Ageing, 2012-2020. The WHO global report on ageism published in March 2021 outlines a framework for action to reduce ageism by including specific recommendations for different actors (governments, UN agencies, civil society organisations, private sector), and providing detailed information on the nature and extent of the phenomenon, its determinants and its impact. It also suggests possible policy scenarios to prevent and counter it, identifies gaps and proposes future lines of research in the field. According to the report, the pandemic, by putting fragile groups in society even more at risk, has accentuated stereotypes. It has also increased negative prejudices, highlighting the resulting discriminatory acts on several fronts. Within this general framework, we are witnessing the taking root in the social fabric of a self-referential ageism, i.e. the tendency towards self-exclusion from various training or employment opportunities. Moreover, on a large scale, ageism undermines intergenerational solidarity.

How can ageism be countered?(3)

- The WHO report presents three operational recommendations to counter age discrimination:
 1. policy and legislative action, i.e. the promotion of policies and legislation that address age discrimination in a systematic manner.
 2. educational activities, formal and informal, which aim to encourage intergenerational empathy and thus reduce prejudice towards different age groups and consequently discrimination, through accurate information, providing counter-stereotypical examples
 3. Intergenerational contact interventions, which aim to reduce mutual prejudices of different age groups through direct interpersonal relationship experience.
- It seems clear to me that universities are the most appropriate subjects to take charge of the actions envisaged in points two and three, the only ones that have the possibility of changing the attitude of the younger age groups towards the older ones by becoming aware of the fact that in the best case scenario, they too will grow old.

Conclusions

- Population ageing is a global phenomenon. Although at the moment the problem seems to affect more advanced developing countries and thus potentially endowed with more resources, in the near future the scale of the phenomenon will be such that it will affect all countries even those that cannot currently be considered advanced developing. This will entail major problems in managing the phenomenon and finding resources.
- In spite of awareness of the issue of old age, we are still witnessing the phenomenon of ageism. This means that the acceptance of the elderly as a still vital element of society is only true on a rational level, but has not been internalised, so that in everyday behaviour the reactions that we could define as instinctive continue to be of a discriminatory type towards the third age.
- The role of the third mission of the universities must therefore be developed along two lines: on the one hand to offer actions that promote active ageing, thus helping to contain public expenditure on health care, and on the other to foster in the new generations the development of a new and inclusive attitude towards the elderly.

Thank you for your kind attention

Guido Amoretti PhD

Department of Education Sciences [DISFOR]

University of Genoa

guido.amoretti@unige.it



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