

Reflections on the quality of life of older people in South Africa using data from the South African Social Attitudes Survey

Abstract.

Background: The world's population is not only growing faster, it is also becoming considerably older. Like other developing regions, South Africa is currently experiencing a growth in the number of older people. It has one of the fastest ageing populations in Africa, with nearly 7% aged 60 and over. As the basis for providing insight into the challenges and policy needs of an increasingly ageing population, this paper focuses on exploring the patterns and determinants of wellbeing among older people in South Africa.

Methods: Use is made of the nationally representative South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). By pooling data from nine consecutive annual survey rounds conducted between 2009 and 2017, we examine the nature, trends and socio-demographic cleavages in patterns of personal wellbeing among 5,246 South Africans aged 60 years and older using the eight-item Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) with the spirituality/religion domain included.

Results: The mean score for the PWI among those aged 60 years and older was 62.5 (\pm 16.4) on aggregate, ranging between 53.8 and 67.3 over the nine-year period. In terms of internal consistency, Cronbach's α was 0.85 for the PWI on aggregate across all years, with the coefficient fluctuating between 0.81 and 0.88 over the years. The PWI showed a correlation of 0.75 with the "satisfaction with life as a whole" item (range across years: 0.66 – 0.77). As for construct validity, all domains made a significant unique contribution to overall life satisfaction, including the discretionary 'spirituality or religion' domain. The combination of both unique and shared variance by the seven domains typically explains 64 percent of the variance in 'Satisfaction with Life as a Whole'. The eight domains also form a single factor and account for 50.4% of the variance among older persons in South Africa. Taken together, this suggests that the PWI has satisfactory psychometric properties among older persons in a heterogeneous society such as South Africa.

Multivariate analysis suggests that significant differences in PWI scores exist among older persons in the country, especially along class lines. The self-rated poor and those living in an informal urban settlement reported lower PWI scores. A positive educational effect was also observed. Even after controlling for these factors, clear racial differences in PWI continue to exist, with older black African adults reporting lower scores on average than white adults. This might be explained by differences in psychosocial, health and functional factors. Although, at the bivariate level, lower PWI values were recorded among older women, the never married, widowed and separated/divorced, as well as the unemployed, these effects fell away in the multivariate modelling. These social-demographic attributes explained nearly a quarter (24.3%) of variance. Depressive mood has a clear inverse association with life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.36$), explaining 12.7% of variance in the dependent variable, and remaining intact even after entering socio-demographic characteristics into the model (the β reducing to -0.24). Feelings of unhappiness or depression, as well as stress and loss of control therefore appear to weigh heavily on the quality of life of older South Africans. Feelings of self-efficacy similarly have a sizeable effect on wellbeing, with the standardised regression coefficient the largest of all the items tested in the table, and explaining approximately a quarter (24.5%) of variance in the SWL measure. The greater the perceived ease of attaining one's goals, the more inclined older adults are to be satisfied with their life in general. The final health measure tested was a general single-item question on self-reported health status, with higher reported health leading to an improved sense of wellbeing, even after controlling for socio-demographic factors.

Conclusion: Ageing issues need to be effectively integrated into programmatic and policy interventions in order to ensure that the dignity and quality of life of older people is protected and sustained progress is made towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: South Africa – Active Ageing – Quality of life – Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) – Life Course