

What makes you feeling old?

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Abstract

Guided by the acknowledged importance of subjective measures of aging alternative to chronological age, we explored gender and educational differences in who feels old and in the reasons to feel old among a representative sample of people aged 65-74 in Italy interviewed in 2013 within the project ““Non mi ritiro”: l'allungamento della vita, una sfida per le generazioni, un'opportunità per la società”. We first carry out a descriptive analysis of gender differences in feeling old and then explore through several logistic regressions the reasons that make men and women feeling old the most, by educational attainment. The results show that women are more likely to feel old than men and the first are also more likely to think that the society considers them to be old. While men feel old mainly when they retire, women mainly associate the feeling of being old to losing physical autonomy, widowhood, and absence of projects. However, both men and women report having felt old when turning 65. Interestingly, having grandchildren reduced the likelihood to report boredom as a reason to feel old among both men and women. Within sub-populations by educational attainment, we find that high educated are less likely to associate ageing with loneliness and boredom, but more likely to link “feeling old” with absence of projects as compared to their lower educated counterparts.

Introduction

Individual and population ageing are usually measured with chronological age and the threshold for “being old” is usually set at 60 or 65 years (United Nations 2001). However, the concept of ageing is not independent of time and place and it should account for improvements in health and

life expectancy that have influenced how people age (Christensen et al. 2009; Lutz et al. 2008; Sanderson and Scherbov 2008, 2013).

Recent works have highlighted the importance of the subjective dimension of ageing, such *felt age*, in order to account for factors such as recognition of chronological age, role involvement, health and physical limitations as well as awareness of societal age norms which may affect decisions.

Previous research showed that age perception is likely to depend on individual's social experiences. Age-related social categorizations that exist in society can serve as signals for a person (Diehl et al. 2015). Moreover, it has been shown that individuals' evaluations of how old they feel are grounded in the experience of age-symbolic events, such as retirement and widowhood (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn et al. 2008; Settersen Jr and Hagestad 2015), but also grandparenting (Bordone and Arpino 2015). Yet, most of the available surveys on older people did not collect direct information on when do people feel old. This paper aims to fill in this gap in the literature by considering the reasons that make a person feeling old.

Data and method

We use data collected in 2013 through a survey carried out within the project "Non mi ritiro": l'allungamento della vita, una sfida per le generazioni, un'opportunità per la società ["I don't want to be inactive": the lengthening of life, a challenge for generations, an opportunity for the society]. Academics and researchers of the Catholic University of Milan as well as Italian and international experts were involved in this project. The research is funded by Catholic University of Milan (D3.2 funds).

The survey, based on face-to-face interviews, focuses on people aged 65-74 living in Italy. The total sample size includes 900 respondents (437 men and 463 women) and it is representative of the Italian population in this age group.

The questionnaire contains a rich set of information on characteristics, perceptions, conditions potentially related to active life, such as health, socio-economic status, employment, social and family networks, use of new technologies, attitudes.

The analyses first show descriptive associations. Second, we carry out multivariate analyses using logistic regression models.

Dependent variables

The dependent variables considered are the following:

- whether the interviewee perceives him/herself as old (four options ranking from not at all to a lot);
- whether the interviewee feels that the society perceives him/her as old (four options ranking from not at all to a lot);

- when did the respondent feel old (eight options are offered, including “never” and only one can be marked);
- what makes a person (in general) feeling old at most (nine options are offered, up to three can be marked).

Explanatory variables and controls

Gender: we distinguish between men and women. In our sample, 48.6% of respondent are men and 51.4% women.

Education: we distinguish between low (up to primary school), middle (secondary education, i.e., “scuole medie”), and high educated (at least high school). In our sample, 35.8% of respondents have elementary education, 30.9% secondary, and 33.3% higher educational attainment.

As covariates we include a set of characteristics pertinent to our research questions and that could affect the perception of feeling old. We control for *age* by including a dummy variable (0 = 65-69; 1 = 70-74). Although some previous studies found that chronological age only modestly predicts perceived age (e.g., Logan et al. 1992), Bergland et al. (2014) found that chronological age was significantly associated with a more youthful subjective age. We account for how important *religion* and the *family* are for the respondent, both on a scale from “not at all” to “a lot”. We also control for the frequency of *face-to-face contact* and of *calls with (grand)children* (never; rarely; once a month; several times a month; at least once a week). The variable *working status* indicates whether the respondent is retired, working, or not working at the time of the interview. Recently, a clear association has been shown between providing grandchild care and feeling younger among both grandfathers and grandmothers above 70 (Bordone and Arpino 2015). We control for a dummy variable which has value 0 if the respondent has no *grandchildren* and 1 if he/she has at least one grandchild. The *living arrangement* variable indicates whether the respondent lives alone (= 0), with partner (= 1 if the respondent lives with others, including the partner), or with others only (i.e., excluding the partner). We have also controlled for the *region* by including a dummy with value 1 if the region is in the North of Italy; 0 if it is in the Centre-South.

Results

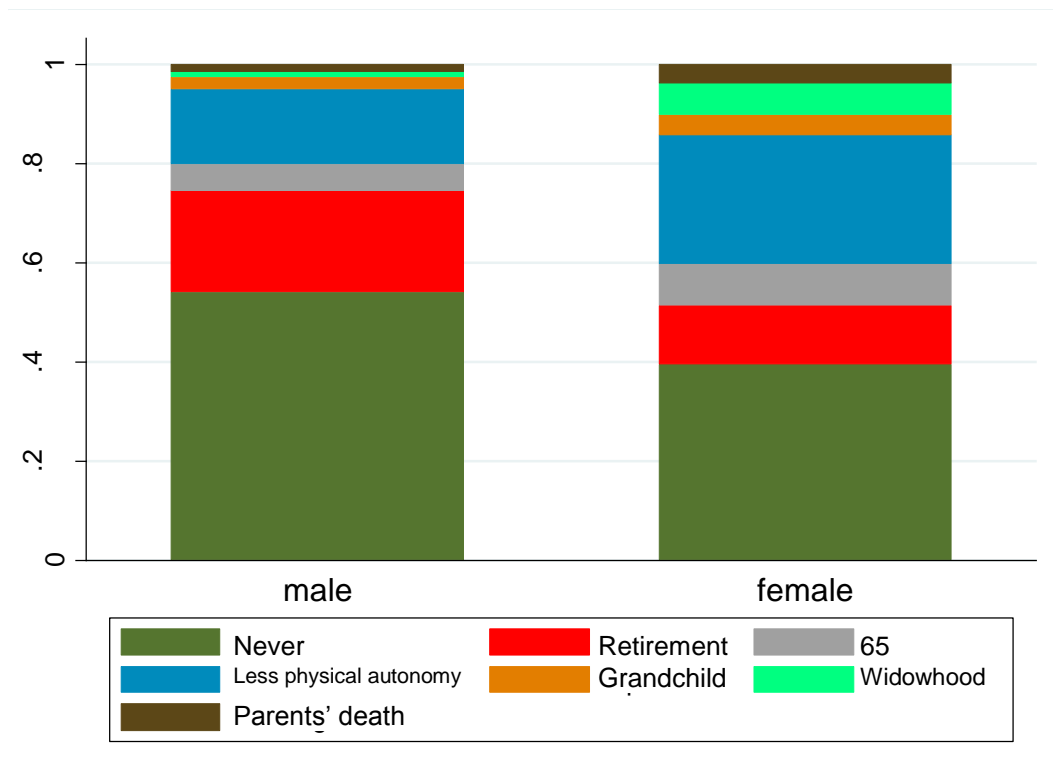
Descriptively, among men, 44% do not feel old at all, 41% report feeling “a bit” old, 13% feel “quite a bit” old, and about 2% feel old very much. The percentages among women are 37.5, 33.7, 23.8 and about 5, respectively. T-tests show that all four answers are significantly different by gender, with women feeling, on average, older than men.

Interestingly, when considering the question “Do you think the others consider you to be old?”, the gender differences are limited to the middle categories (“a bit” and “quite a bit”); while no significant difference is present in men’s and women’s answers “not at all” or “very much”. Indeed, 30% of male respondents and 27% of females report not feeling to be considered old at

all and about 4% among both men and women answer “very much”. Yet, when we look at the middle categories, while 41% of men report “a bit”, 36% of women say “quite a bit”.

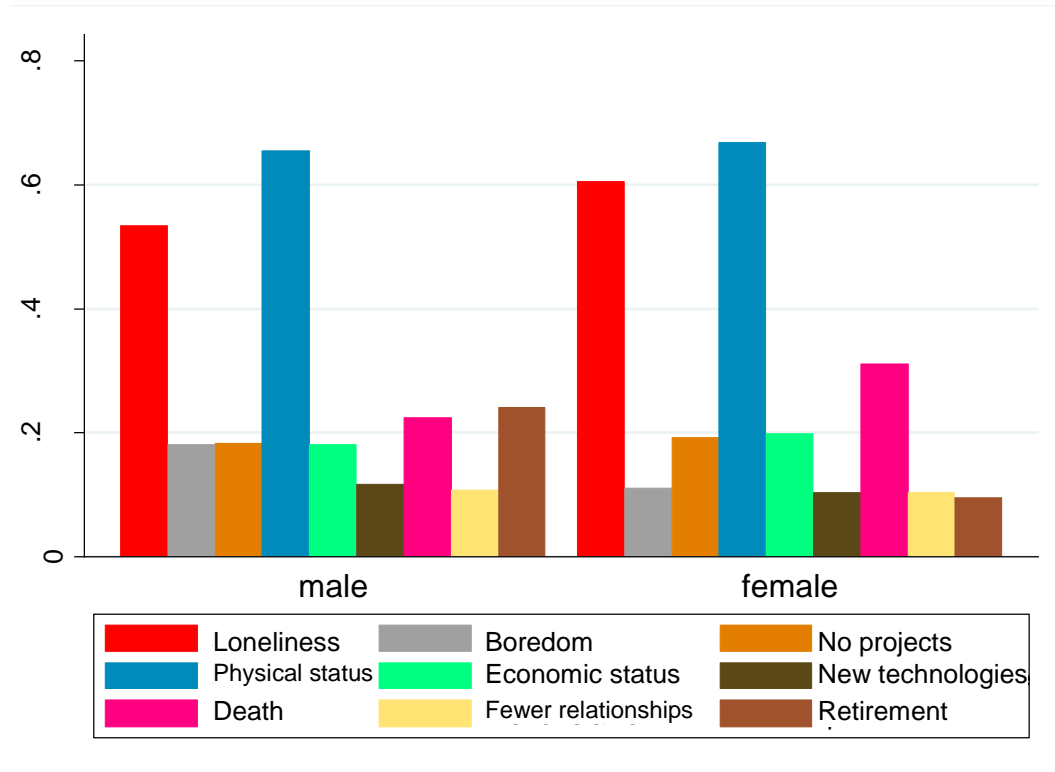
We then look at when people did feel old. The answers are summarized, by gender, in Figure 1. It is interesting to note that, on average, men report more often to have never felt old as compared to women (54 vs. 39%, respectively, with a statistically significant difference). They also tend to report more often retirement as a reason to have felt old. However, we could think that such difference is due to the fact that fewer women in the sample have worked in the life as compared to men and therefore they have not experienced retirement. On the contrary, women report more often than men turning 65, decline in physical autonomy, and widowhood as reasons to have felt old. Becoming grandparent is a reason to have felt old for about 3% of both men and women.

Figure 1. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question “When did you feel old?”, by gender.



In order to better capture what people associate to ageing, however, we make use of a more general question that is independent from what people have already experienced: “What makes a person feel old at most?”. Here respondents could tick more than one answer (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distribution (%) of the answers to the question “What makes a person feeling old at most?”, by gender.



Although both men and women report often loneliness and decrease in physical status as reasons to feel old, the percentage of women mentioning the first (60.5%) is significantly higher than that of men (53.3%).

Among men, retirement and boredom are more likely to be associated with feeling old than among women. For these latter, however, the death of family members is more often reported than for men.

Although the literature has often discussed isolation among older people, it is interesting to note that both among men and women, only about 10% mention decrease in social relationships as a reason for feeling old.

In a second step, we carry out multivariate analyses, using each of these answers as a dependent variable in a set of logistic models, where our variables of interest are gender and education. Table 1 shows the odds ratios and standard errors in parentheses.

Women are less likely than men to link “feeling old” with boredom and retirement, but more likely to associate it with absence of projects. High educated are less likely than their low educated counterparts to associate ageing with loneliness and boredom, but more likely to link “feeling old” with absence of projects.

Table 1. Odds ratios from logistic regressions (standard errors in parentheses).

	Loneliness	Boredom	No projects	Physical status	Economic status	New technologies	Death	Less relationships	Retirement
(Elementary)									
Secondary	0.82 (0.15)	0.69 (0.17)	1.26 (0.34)	1.00 (0.19)	0.76 (0.18)	1.23 (0.35)	1.03 (0.21)	0.94 (0.28)	0.97 (0.24)
High education	0.60** (0.11)	0.44** (0.12)	3.37*** (0.84)	1.22 (0.24)	0.94 (0.22)	1.28 (0.38)	0.93 (0.20)	1.06 (0.32)	0.77 (0.20)
(Male)									
Female	1.21 (0.20)	0.62* (0.14)	1.51* (0.31)	1.03 (0.17)	1.09 (0.22)	0.91 (0.23)	1.28 (0.23)	0.71 (0.19)	0.37*** (0.08)
Age 70-75 (Ref.: 64-69)	0.79 (0.12)	0.91 (0.19)	0.92 (0.18)	1.41* (0.22)	0.88 (0.16)	0.86 (0.20)	1.09 (0.18)	0.92 (0.22)	0.75 (0.15)
Importance of Religion	1.46* (0.23)	0.69 (0.16)	0.98 (0.20)	0.92 (0.15)	1.36 (0.26)	1.16 (0.28)	1.15 (0.20)	1.05 (0.27)	0.84 (0.18)
Importance of Family	0.89 (0.27)	1.38 (0.62)	1.05 (0.43)	0.99 (0.31)	1.18 (0.49)	2.86 (2.14)	1.97 (0.81)	1.09 (0.56)	1.26 (0.52)
Visit to (grand)children	1.11 (0.20)	1.10 (0.29)	1.46 (0.36)	0.67* (0.13)	1.32 (0.31)	1.39 (0.42)	1.31 (0.27)	0.65 (0.19)	0.83 (0.21)
Visit from (grand)children	1.00 (0.22)	0.84 (0.28)	1.08 (0.32)	1.08 (0.26)	1.06 (0.31)	1.15 (0.45)	0.84 (0.22)	1.61 (0.63)	0.80 (0.24)
Calls with (grand)children	1.49+ (0.32)	0.97 (0.29)	0.94 (0.28)	1.11 (0.25)	1.19 (0.34)	2.13+ (0.91)	1.09 (0.27)	1.05 (0.38)	1.06 (0.31)
Working (Ref. retired)	1.22 (0.27)	0.89 (0.28)	1.61+ (0.41)	0.66+ (0.15)	0.93 (0.26)	0.76 (0.27)	0.93 (0.25)	0.65 (0.26)	0.92 (0.26)
At home/Not working	0.95 (0.23)	0.76 (0.29)	0.71 (0.26)	1.13 (0.29)	0.95 (0.29)	1.16 (0.43)	1.53+ (0.39)	1.16 (0.46)	0.42+ (0.21)
Has grandchild(ren)	0.94 (0.20)	0.55+ (0.19)	0.76 (0.24)	1.13 (0.26)	0.74 (0.21)	1.07 (0.35)	1.36 (0.31)	1.01 (0.35)	0.98 (0.31)
Living with partner (Ref.: living alone)	0.88 (0.18)	1.09 (0.32)	1.01 (0.27)	1.63* (0.34)	0.69 (0.17)	1.24 (0.42)	0.78 (0.18)	1.05 (0.35)	2.42* (0.88)
Living with others	0.76 (0.22)	0.55 (0.28)	1.34 (0.51)	1.13 (0.34)	0.63 (0.24)	1.37 (0.65)	1.96* (0.60)	0.50 (0.30)	2.36+ (1.12)
North (Ref.: Centre-South)	0.85 (0.13)	1.08 (0.23)	1.05 (0.20)	0.82 (0.13)	1.00 (0.19)	1.71* (0.40)	1.25 (0.21)	1.01 (0.25)	1.15 (0.23)
N	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800	800

Note: + p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.

Conclusion

Descriptively, we found that women are more likely to feel old and to think that they are considered old than men. Men feel old mainly when they retire; women feel old mainly when they lose physical autonomy and because of widowhood; both report feeling old when turning 65.

Once multivariate analyses are used, the results show that women tend to associate feeling old with absence of projects; while men are more likely to link “feeling old” with boredom and retirement. Respondents with high education are less likely to associate “feeling old” with loneliness and boredom, but more likely to link it with absence of projects.

In the next steps, we aim to refine the analyses by adding more detailed control variables and possibly extend the analyses to other age identity measures. We believe that the analysis of this

dataset significantly add to previous studies on the meaning of ageing for individuals carried out on large cross-national data by investigating more in details the reasons that make a person feel old and by focusing on a quite homogenous age group. We will therefore further exploit the nature of these data by investigating the interaction between gender and education by region and considering geographical and socio-economic differences in the perception of ageing and in its association with participation in social activities.

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