
**“Promoting positive body image in ageing people: Challenges in developing and
implementing holistic approaches”**

SHORT SCIENTIFIC REPORT

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Host: Dr. Karin Waldherr, Ferdinand Porsche Distance Learning University of Applied Sciences, Wien,
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Purpose of the STSM

The primary aim of the STSM visit was to expand my knowledge and to exchange ideas and experiences regarding body image and appearance matters, focusing mainly on the needs and issues regarding body image-related research in ageing people. Another goal was to explore implementation of positive body image promotion programs in contexts such as school and family, as well as in terms of policy making in Austria, and in comparison with the Greek context. A final goal was to consider the potentiality of designing intervention programs that can be universally applied.

Description of the work carried out during the STSM and of the main results obtained

During the STSM visit our work with Dr. Waldherr was focused on meeting the following specific objectives (in italics):

1. To familiarize with research on ageing, appearance/ body image issues and implications for public health in Wien, Austria

Thorough discussions with Dr. Waldherr, as well as literature review, led to the conclusion that research on appearance/ body image issues in Austria so far mainly focuses on age groups other than ageing people, such as adolescents and younger adults. Therefore, there seems to be a lack of empirical data regarding these issues in women and men above 50 years. Dr. Waldherr's experience from clinical settings suggests that there is little awareness among older people regarding the importance of body image, appearance, related fear of aging, and of conditions, such as eating disorders. Thus, in everyday practice, elderly people seldom seem to address appearance-related concerns/ problems and may be deprived of the chance to receive appropriate individualized support.

2. To consider methodological issues regarding body image assessment in old age

Body image assessment in old age is a challenging topic. Dr. Waldherr informed me about the work conducted in relation to this field at the recent meeting of the respective Appearance Matters group in Budapest, April 2015. We further discussed it, as well as the current literature. Firstly, there seems to be a need for developing appropriate assessment tools. Since the vast majority of the available questionnaires are in English, translation and validation in different European languages is necessary. Another matter that we considered was that assessment tools need to be appropriate for people with various education and literacy levels. Also, after going through studies which investigated body image in ageing people, we came to the conclusion that in many studies the sample sizes were either small or unrepresentative of various age groups. This poses the matter of which specific age groups should be included in research designs, in order to study body image formation in ageing people and to trace its development. Drawing from sociological research, Dr. Waldherr proposed adopting the distinction between a third and a fourth age. There is no specific calendric age which marks the transition from the third to the fourth age. According to Laslett (1995) the third age is the time span after retirement which is characterized by an active life style. The fourth age on the other hand is characterized by impairment and disease. Thus, in most cases the fourth age is equitable with the very high chronological age.

Since the aforementioned life stages are characterized by changes in physiology and, possibly, in identity, it seems appropriate to explore body image changes and potential related problems, appearance investment, as well as history of previous appearance-related issues and their current manifestation. Other factors that can be considered in relation to body image are fear of aging, lifestyle (eating behaviours, exercise), medical and psychological history, health-related quality of life, life events and their impact, sociocultural factors, such as gender stereotypes, and self-concept. Changes in relationships, such as marital problems, divorce/widowhood and forming new relationships may also be of interest in relation with body image issues in old age. In general, caution in selecting assessment tools is warranted, since those that are available for younger age groups may not be appropriate for older adults and they may fail to fully capture their subjective body-related psychological experiences, and to assess other factors as well, such as self-concept. Regarding body image, one should also consider the appropriateness of assessment tools for both genders.

Finally, qualitative research may also provide further insights in body image development in old age.

3. To learn about designing and implementation of prevention and/ or intervention programs aiming at positive body image promotion in Austria

During the STSM I learned about "Women's Health Program of Vienna". It is a customized program which was developed by the city of Vienna and it has been running successfully since 1998. It aims at providing medical, psychological and social services for girls and women and at increasing awareness of women's health and of holistic approaches. It addresses a variety of gendered health topics and appearance issues are incorporated in them. Within this program, various projects are carried out focusing on both health promotion and on empowering women in their own psychosocial environments. Professionals working in it also aim to influence policy making. They have also worked on the availability of the services: Program website is user-friendly, informative and psychosocially oriented. There is also a very successful free hotline for girls and women who seek information and/or consultation on eating disorders. Available data show that the hotline is highly preferred (18000 callers in 10 years) and it is also a more effective and flexible approach than counselling via e-mail.

In terms of prevention, free seminars and workshops are offered and organized in school settings. Another related project was a competition which was organized in schools, titled "*We like everyBODY! Our Schools without Thinness*". The concept required students to work on creating a campaign against thin ideal and promoting a healthy body image. The project was also communicated through social media.

Overall, this program seems like an effective model, which can be applied in various communities. It also stands as an example of fruitful cooperation between experts and local authorities.

Another program that used to be offered by the Medical University of Vienna comprised of providing on-line a self-help manual, in combination with counseling.

4. To learn about health policy formation in Austria

In Austria, different regions make their own decisions regarding healthcare and health promotion. Although this may enhance autonomy, on the other hand it does not always seem very functional in terms of meeting citizens' needs equally and effectively. Also, there may be adverse effects for public health. Therefore, in the past years there have been efforts to make health policy formation more centralized. What is promising is that policy makers seem to have come to realize that it costs less to invest in health promotion and prevention rather than in treatment. Therefore, it seems that nowadays more resources are invested in these purposes, although health budget still dominantly goes to treatment. Experts also find it easier to offer their opinions and to voice their concerns, regarding health policies and strategies. Still, there is a strong need to enhance health literacy as well as social support, especially in the older age groups. Moreover, health promotion still seems to be one of the first domains to suffer from financial cuts, when there is a need to reduce public expenses. Finally, there seems to be a lack of continuity: This may mean that successful projects are not extended/ repeated, or that psychosocial support services may only be available to specific age groups - i.e. there are services offered to adolescents, but clients cannot continue receiving them, when they come of age.

5. To provide input on health-related policies regarding the elderly in Greece

The situation in Greece shows many similarities to Austria. Health policy regarding the elderly in Greece is centralized and more oriented towards treatment, although there have been efforts to promote health literacy and prevention. Apart from hospitals and health centers, health services and social care have also been provided at home through “Help at home” programs. Another important institution is open day-care centers for the elderly, called KAPIs. These centers are popular meeting spots, which aim to offer recreational and educational activities, medical and nursing care, psychosocial support and physical therapy. Also, research and health promotion projects may take place there. Moreover, in different municipalities, local authorities as well as non-profit organizations may create structures offering various services. The economic crisis, which Greece has been facing for the past years, has led to under-financing and contributed to insufficient operation of the aforementioned services. Apart from private sector provision units (which may be an expensive option), elderly care often takes place in the family and is typically considered a duty of the female members. Overall, except for limited funding, there has always been a lack of long-term policies regarding health promotion and healthcare, as well as problems with continuity for successful projects.

6. To discuss whether designing universal intervention programs is possible and to consider the contribution of cultural factors

Dr. Waldherr proposed an intervention model, based on a project previously developed by Stanford University. Within this model, initial screening for body image problems can lead to building separate groups. Each one of them will further receive a different kind of intervention: the first group may include people without problems, who can receive interventions targeting on overall health enhancement, including positive body image promotion. The second group may include people, who have reported various specific concerns/ symptoms, and will receive targeted interventions. The third group may include high-risk populations, who will be offered treatment. Within this model a variety of needs can be met and people can receive the type of intervention which is more appropriate for them.

A potential setback is that ageing people are not always easy to approach and engage, either in research or intervention projects. Therefore, we discussed possible ways of overcoming this barrier.

Firstly, it is important to increase awareness regarding body image among health & mental health practitioners as well as in professionals such as general practitioners, dietitians, pharmacists, physical therapists and dentists. This may result to better screening and more referrals, along with creating networks providing information and holistic interventions. Moreover, interdisciplinary teams that can offer a variety of services in the same context seem very helpful. Elderly people can also be reached through their social networks, at their meeting spots, through telephone and social media and they may also be more motivated if they are offered specific rewards. In any case, factors such as gender issues, residence (urban vs. rural areas), accessibility options, education level and IT literacy should be considered.

Finally, except for interventions targeting at the elderly, long-term prevention actions, promoting a healthy body image in terms of overall health enhancement, can also be applied in younger age groups (i.e. preschoolers, future parents).

Future collaboration with the host institution

We discussed possible participation of Greece in the group of countries working on studying body image and appearance issues in ageing people.

Final comments

The STSM visit was a very enjoyable and fulfilling learning and networking experience. Comparative analysis of two different cultural contexts was very enlightening and it can be useful in terms of research and intervention designing. Moreover, literature review and discussions with Dr. Waldherr helped me enrich the part of my thesis which discusses body image development in old age.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Waldherr for organizing an interesting STSM visit and for her thoughtfulness, assistance and hospitality. I would also like to thank her colleagues for their kind reception. Finally, I am thankful to the Management Committee of the COST Action IS1210 for making this STSM visit possible.

Maria Zafiri,

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11/05/2015

Confirmation by the host institution of the successful execution of the STSM

I declare that Maria Zafiri stayed at Ferdinand Porsche Distance Learning University of Applied Sciences during her STSM period from April 20, 2015 to April 24, 2015, and that the description of the work carried out during the STMS is correct. The STSM was very insightful and satisfying both from the scientific and personal point of view.



Karin Waldherr

Vienna, 18/05/2015