
Almatourism

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Positive aging, Positive Psychology and Tourism. A challenging new area of investigation?

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the issue of positive aging and how it can be improved through traveling and environment exploration. Moving from the most relevant contemporary theoretical perspectives on positive aging, the first part of the article focuses the attention on the conceptualization of successful aging, and examines the theoretical basis that could support the thesis that traveling can be viewed as an hallmark of this condition. The second part of the article takes into consideration a recent new area of psychological science, the Positive Psychology, trying to briefly examine the potential of the “well-being approach” for reaching a positive aging also through the tourist activity.

Keywords: Positive Aging; Positive Psychology; Senior Tourism; Well-Being; Positive Functioning

L'articolo prende in esame il tema dell'invecchiamento positivo e di come esso possa essere potenziato attraverso la pratica del turismo e l'esplorazione dell'ambiente. Partendo dalle prospettive teoriche contemporanee più rilevanti sull'invecchiamento positivo, la prima parte dell'articolo focalizza la sua attenzione sulle differenti concettualizzazioni dell'invecchiamento positivo, esaminando le basi teoriche che possono supportare la tesi che il viaggiare può essere visto come un vero e proprio tratto distintivo di questa condizione. La seconda parte dell'articolo prende in considerazione una nuova, recente area delle scienze psicologiche, la Psicologia Positiva, cercando di esaminare brevemente le potenzialità dell'“approccio centrato sul

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benessere” per raggiungere la condizione di invecchiamento positivo anche attraverso l’attività turistica.

Keywords: Invecchiamento Positivo; Psicologia Positiva; Turismo Senior; Benessere; Funzionamento Positivo

Introduction

The demographic revolution and its consequences on the population structure

The structural change of the population pyramid that is occurring since several decades in the western countries highlights a crucial, widespread phenomenon: the increasing relevance of aging population, that will become a large proportion of the total population in the next ten-twenty years (Eurostat, 2016; WHO, 2016). This structural change highlights a fundamental challenge for the contemporary society, the necessity of a broader and deeper comprehension of the bio-psycho-social factors that are involved in the achievement and maintenance of autonomy and positive overall functioning in the last stages of life. The question of how to reach a positive aging constitutes nowadays a crucial issue for several disciplines, eg. the gerontology, the psychology and the sociology. But other areas of investigation are becoming aware of the profound implications of the increasing amplitude of the elderly population; among these, the tourism research can of course be invested by this demographic change, requesting new instruments and competences for being able to respond to it in the best and most effective way.

1. The concept of positive aging: a systemic approach

The studies on aging processes have been known a substantial modification since the introduction, in medical and psychosocial sciences, of the systemic bio-psychosocial paradigm (Engel, 1977). This paradigm turned back the reductionist conception of illness and well-being, maintaining that the condition of illness was not a simple and causal consequence of a specific agent such as a virus or a bacterium, and the condition of well-being were not due to the mere absence of disease, but it implies the presence of psychological resources and well-being, together with a constructive and well-functioning social environment. This systemic approach conceives the outcomes of illness and/or well-being as the co-presence of protective or vice-versa risk factors that synergistically influence the overall functioning of the individuals.

This systemic approach has known a growing relevance in the medical and psychosocial sciences, influencing also the way in which aging processes and aging condition have to be conceived and investigated.

Since the end of xx century, several theoretical models have indeed adopted a systemic and integrated approach to positive aging. Rowe & Khan (1997) have identified three potential outcomes of aging: the usual aging, that is characterized by modest declines at cognitive and functional level (eg. memory efficiency); the pathological aging, that is characterized by the presence of serious diseases such as Alzheimer syndrome and a marked decline and impairment of all functions; the successful aging, that on the contrary is characterized by the maintenance of high cognitive, psychological and social functioning. For Rowe & Khan the positive aging is determined by the contemporary presence of high physical and personal resources, which make it possible the active participation of the elderly to social life, the authentic hallmark of successful aging. These authors identify in the active involvement in social life the essence of aging well; we shall return to this model for its potential implications in the area of senior tourism research (see paragraph 3).

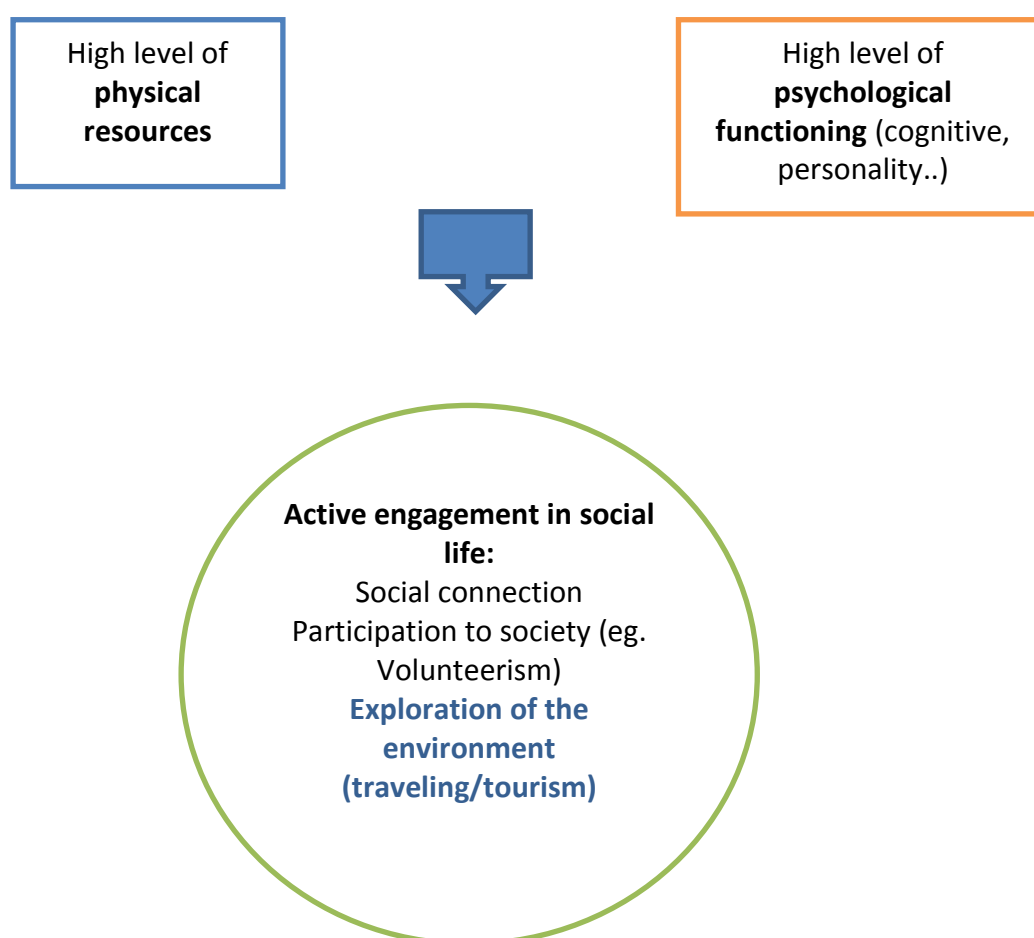
Kahana et al. (2005; 2014) have constructed a complex and integrated model on positive aging, moving from a proactive conception of individuals. They sustain that humans are agentic and proactive during the entire life-span, trying to actively intervene in the environment for creating the best conditions for their growth and positive functioning. This model identifies three outcomes that together concur to the quality of life of the elderly: a positive affective state (the experience of positive emotions), the presence of meaning in life, the maintenance of valued activities and relationships. The old people try to reach these outcomes through the activation of two types of behaviors: the preventive and corrective adaptations, that together represents the overall proactive adaptations strategies. Among them, the self - improvement could intercept our theme of discovering and exploring the environment, since it represent an attempt to maximize the human potentials through the life-course (Caro, Bass & Chen, 1993). The focus on education and learning new skills can enhance the abilities and the desire for new knowledge, including the enjoyment of new experiences and the self-perception of personal growth through traveling. Indeed, the improvement of knowledge and education, not only promote a better cognitive functioning, but also can improve the perceived self- efficacy, that is regarded as a crucial factor for traveling. On the other side, the meaningful life can be enhanced also through traveling, as highlighted Hsu et al. (2006) in their model of senior tourism motivation, where they posited life continuity as one of the most motivating factor for environment discovering and exploration. The experience of positive emotions, also can be strengthened through the escaping of routines, and the enjoyment of positive relationships and companionships, another relevant motivation for tourism (Hsu et al., 2006).

2. Positive aging and tourism: the novelty of the approach; the theoretical supports

Within the debate of positive functioning in old age, the theme of environment exploration and traveling for tourism could represent a relevant indicator of optimal aging.

As we have considered above, the principal systemic models of successful aging highlight the centrality of active participation of the elderly to the society. The perspective adopted by Rowe & Khan (1997) identifies two components of social participation, namely the creation of relational ties (marshalling social support) and the active involvement in social activities (eg. volunteerism). Being motivated in exploring the environment (for personal growth, for cultural enrichment, for leisure time ...) can be considered, perhaps, another component of this broad social participation (see figure 1)

Figure 1.Rowe & Khan (1997): the systemic-integrated model on successful aging: exploration of the environment as component of active engagement in social life (Zambianchi, 2017).



The Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1986; Ainsworth et al., 1978) sustains that humans are characterized by two fundamental needs: the need for a secure base and the need for environment exploration. Together they concur to the development of the individual across life. The need for a secure base is satisfied through the attachment to special persons, such as mother during the first infancy. The quality of the mother-children attachment is central for the construction of the secure base in children (and its internal representation), and it will influence the most significant relationships of

the individual across life-span. A secure base, that correspond to the presence of a sensitive, but not intrusive mother, able to respond at the request of her son/daughter, can favor the internal representation of the others as trustful and essentially honest. The presence of a perceived secure base, as several studies have evidenced, encourages the exploration of the environment since the first stage of life (Ainsworth, 1978), and contributes, when people become adults, to the creation of enduring and satisfying relationships. It may be that old people who have internalized secure attachment models, can continue to explore the environment also when they become more fragile due to the physical decline and the presence of diseases. The insecure attachment, that correspond to the internalization of anxious or fearful relationships with the mother or the significant caregiver during infancy, can undermine the ability, or the competence in exploring the environment (Green & Campbell, 2000; Saribay & Andersen, 2007). The presence of internalized secure working models, or representations of the social world as worthy of trust, could favor the tourism travel also in old age, being it associated with more openness to new experiences and great interest in exploration activities. It may be also that an environment that is perceived as "secure" (eg. guarantee medical assistance) can improve the desire for its knowledge also in those elderly with insecure/ anxious inner models or with physical frailty.

The Motivation Theory of Life Span Development (Heckhausen, Wrosch & Schultz, 2010), maintains that a central feature of adaptive capacity is the regulation of motivation, and that the life course is organized around a sequential series of action cycles that involve goal selection, goal pursuit, and disengagement from goals. The Motivation Theory proposes that the key criterion for adaptive development is the extent to which the individual realizes control of his/her environment across different life domains and across life span. The authors make a conceptual distinction between primary and secondary control processes. Primary control processes are conceptualized as directed at changing the world to bring the environment into line with one's wishes. In contrast, secondary control processes are defined as changing the self to "bring oneself into line with environmental forces" (p. 6). Not all goals can be pursued at all times of life. Biological maturation and aging, societal age grading (eg. going to school, retirement) and social norms about age-appropriate behaviors create a timetable of developmental opportunities, several of which are considered to be normative developmental tasks (Havigurst, 1953). As noted the authors, the age-related structuring of the life course itself is subject to historical change. The life phase of retirement has been added in many developed societies ad new stage of life.

So, the investment in goals such as traveling, expanding the knowledge about proximal /distant environments can be pursuit due to the augmented free time but, at the same time, requests the presence of consistent resources (eg. financial, physical, cognitive...). At the same time, the possibility to realize personal projects such as traveling for enriching personal knowledge, for enjoying companionship, for improving positive emotions and discover new cultures, reflects the utilization of primary control strategies, that are universally preferred at all stages of life (Zambianchi, 2013). The possibility to pursuit personal projects related to travel and environmental discovering can be, for this reason, beneficial for self-esteem, self-efficacy, emotional well-being and other criteria and factors of positive aging.

3. Positive Psychology: fostering the well-being of individuals. Enhancing the experience of well-being as powerful motivational force for traveling in old age.

3.1 The novelty of Positive Psychology

At the beginning of the Third Millennium the American Psychologists Journal hosted a special number devoted to a new area of research, the Positive Psychology. As stated Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Positive Psychology focuses its attention on positive aspects of human functioning, turning back the traditional theoretical perspective on mental health, for which the psychological well-being coincided with the absence of illness (Ryff & Singer, 1996; Sheldon & King, 2001). Positive Psychology instead gives attention to resources and potentials of individuals, instead crisis and maladjustment, with the objective of promoting the well-being of individuals and social contexts. As already highlighted by WHO (1992), an healthy condition is not defined as mere absence of illness, but as a condition which includes the physical, mental and social well-being; in this theoretical perspective, health implies the ability to realize personal expectations, fulfill personal needs and interact in an adaptive manner with social environment (Millar & Hull, 1997).

Positive Psychology focuses its theoretical and practical attention on well-being and its complex and multiplex features, or conceptualizations. The following section constitutes an attempt to present and give a brief explanation of the main areas of well-being, together with an attempt to suggest ideas, hypotheses, and proposals for their connections with tourism activity.

3.2 Hedonic well-being: the pursuit of emotional harmony and a good life satisfaction.

The hedonic well-being is rooted into the Greek philosopher Aristippo (435-360 a.C.), that defined happiness as the inner experience of a maximum amount of pleasure, and that happiness is the totality of one's hedonic moments. From a psychological point of view, Kubovy (1999) has adopted a broad conception of hedonism, that includes the preferences and pleasures of the mind as well as the body. Happiness is not reducible to physical hedonism, as claimed Diener et al. (1998), for it can be derived from attainment of goals or valued outcomes in different areas of life. Kahneman et al. (1999) defined hedonic psychology as the study of "what makes experiences and life pleasant and unpleasant" (p.9), while Diener & Lucas (1999) defined this dimension of well-being as a combination of cognitive and emotional processes. The hedonic well-being consists of three components: life satisfaction, the presence of positive emotions, the absence (or a lesser frequency of them) of negative emotions. The cognitive component may be conceptualized as an overall judgment on personal life (life satisfaction), while the emotional comfort is related to the recent experience of positive emotions and /or negative emotions. A high level of well-being is reached when individuals possess a positive, global life satisfaction, together with a more

frequent experience of positive emotions, confronted with negative one (Antonelli, 2000).

The pursuit of happiness constitutes a relevant objective for all ages. Moreover, several authors have highlighted that possessing high level of life satisfaction and high frequency of positive emotions is protective against diseases in the third and fourth age (Friedman, 2012).

In old age, traveling can enhance this subjective experience, as suggested by several authors. Hallab (2006), Nawijn (2010; 2011), have demonstrated that tourism can increase individual's happiness. It may be that several types of tourism, such as thermal /health related tourism, relax and shopping concur to the enhancement of the hedonic well-being. Zambianchi (2016), in a research aimed at evaluating the influence of time perspective on life project in old age has highlighted that present hedonistic (that correspond to the enjoyment of social companionships in the "here and now") is predictive of life projects centered on leisure time (eg. shopping), suggesting that several type of behavior are chosen for the enhancement of emotional happiness.

One question, however, is the short duration of the emotional excitement due to traveling experience (Liu, 2013). Referring to studies on the determinants of hedonic well-being, it appear that hedonic level (especially emotional tone) last only for 2 weeks (Nawjin, 2011), highlighting the short- term effect of vacationing on this kind of well-being, and suggesting that for reaching a long-term effect these travel experiences have to be repeated.

3.3 Eudaimonic well-being: the actualization of talents and potentials in favor of the society

The concept of "eudaimonia" is rooted into the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 a.C.). In his text "Nicomachean Ethics", he stated that the condition of happiness can be pursued when individuals realize their "true self" (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) according to their inner vocations, talents and potentials. But, for the experience of happiness it is also necessary the utilization of these potentials for the growth of the society. Two concepts are at the core of the eudaimonic perspective: the concept of happiness as "tension for realizing thyself" and the concept of individualism, as personal research of growth and actualization of human potentials into the society (Ryff & Singer, 2008). The eudaimonic approach is also related to the Humanistic Psychology of Maslow (1962) and Rogers (1962), that introduced the concept of self-realization as human universal tendency and to the conception of "individuation" of Jung (1933) that corresponds to the process of self-realization during which one integrates those contents of the psyche that have the ability to become conscious, and represents a search for totality and integration of personal qualities. Another relevant author that have contributed to the theoretical definition of the eudaimonic conception of well-being is Hahoda (1958) that defined mental health in positive terms, instead focusing on mental illness and dysfunction (see also Keyes, 2002; 2007), anticipating the theoretical movement of Positive Psychology.

Ryff (1982; 1989), taking into consideration these different conceptions has proposed a conceptualization of well-being as composed by six dimensions: Self-acceptance (the knowledge and acceptance the individuals have of themselves, including the awareness of personal limitations); Autonomy (whether the individuals viewed themselves to be living in accord with their own personal convictions and are able to resist to social pressure); Environmental Mastery (how individuals are able in managing their life situations and in changing the unsatisfactory conditions); Purpose in Life (the extent to which individuals felt their lives had meaning, purpose and directions); Personal Growth (the extent to which individuals are making use of their personal talents and potentials); Positive Relationships (the depth of connection the individuals have in ties with significant others). Several research have highlighted the protective role of eudaimonic well-being for reaching a positive aging (Ryff, 2014), being it associated both with positive biomarkers and positive psychological conditions. Traveling for personal growth, for enriching the personality, or as personal future project can concur to the enhancement of this central feature of positive functioning in old age. It may be supposed that specific type of tourism, such as cultural tourism, or natural tourism (discovering new natural areas, or pay attention to specific types of ecosystems) may favor the enrichment of the self in old age, and set in motion a “virtuous cycle”, where the enhancement of eudaimonic well-being can in turn strength the motivation for traveling, since this activity is felt as bearer of positive state of mind and constructive tension for self-enhancement.

Another individualistic and eudaimonic approach to well-being is represented by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008). This theory posits the intrinsic motivation (actions and decisions that come from the authentic self of the individual and are sustained by inherent interest and enjoyability) as central force for development, growth and well-being. The SDT articulated a theory of basic psychological needs that are at the foundations of personal growth, integrity and well-being (Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008). They are the need for Autonomy, that refers to a sense of choice and volition in the regulation of behavior, the need for Competence, that is related to a sense of efficacy one has with respect to both external and internal environments, the need for Relatedness, that refers to feeling to be connected and cared about by others. According to SDT, the fulfillment of these basic needs fosters the well-being and the fulfillment of all of them constitutes a necessary condition for a person’s growth. This eudaimonic perspective can intercept our question about traveling in old age. Traveling may be viewed as a “hallmark” of autonomy in old age. The desire for knowing, escaping routines, enjoy the companionships, choosing the preferred destinations, all concur to improve the perception of personal autonomy and the motivation for traveling. Acquiring new information, a better knowledge of other cultures, values, religions, educational models, artistic expression, naturalistic ecosystems, increase the feeling to be competent. Traveling can support the need for competence and the improvement of environmental mastery, that is one of the sub-components of eudaimonic psychological well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2008). In old age there are many change in the composition of social network, due to the possible loss of loved or friends, or to the desire of reducing the number of acquaintances, selecting those that better fit the personality, the values and the preferences of the elderly (Carstensen & Lang, 2002).

The old people can, on the other side, suffer for loneliness, favoring the feeling of depression, one of the most critical condition and risk factor for maladjustment in this phase of life (Holwerda et al., 2012). Traveling can be of course an activity that help people to be connected to others, to acquire new friends, enjoy their companionship also through the shared activity of discovering the environment. The “eudaimonic living” (Deci & Ryan, 2008) can produce the perception of “subjective vitality”, defined by the authors as a sense of psychological and physical energy that is available to the self for life pursuit. They have shown that vitality is closely associated with autonomy; it may be that traveling can offer to the elderly the possibility for enhancing the perception of subjective vitality, contributing to reach a positive aging, since they realize relevant life projects (Zambianchi, 2016).

3.4 Social well-being. The perceived quality of individual-society relationships.

Keyes indeed, moving a substantial criticism to the conception of well-being as merely individual construct, introduced the construct of social well-being, thinking that human flourishing (or positive mental health) is characterized by the co-presence of high level of emotional satisfaction, high level of self-realization and high quality of individual-society transactions (Keyes, 2002; 2007).

The construct of social well-being is constituted by five dimensions that, together, indicate whether and to what degree an individual is functioning well in his/her social life: Social integration (the evaluation of the quality of one's relationship to society and the community); Social contribution (the evaluation of one's value to society and the belief that one is a vital member of society); Social coherence (the perception of the quality, organization, and operation of the social world, including a concern for knowing about the world); Social actualization (the evaluation of the potential and the trajectory of society); Social acceptance (the construing of society through the character and qualities of other people as generalized category). Keyes & Brim (MIDUS Study, 2004) have analyzed the level of social well-being across stages of life, founding that it evolves along life, with a substantial growth from young people to old age on social integration and social acceptance, and having the highest value in youngest stages of life for social contribution. They defined social well-being as a component of positive functioning that is rooted into the earliest stages of life and influenced by structural conditions such as level of education and gender. Contrary to the individual components of well-being, social well-being constitutes nowadays an understudied area of investigation. Zambianchi (2015) has evidenced the role of proactivity for a higher level of it in old age; old people that utilize active and agentic strategies toward the environment possess a better quality of relationship with the proximal and distal society. So, the proactive behaviour that correspond at choosing a destination, organizing the travel, planning for its good realization could contribute to the enhancement of social well-being.

The issue of social well-being, at the interface between individual and society, draws attention on another question of growing interest in our post -modern complex society (Beck, 1992), the individual (and groups, of course) engagement in actions aimed at the construction of a better and more just society. The growing interconnections between different geographical areas, different production and economic systems, the trend in multiculturalism that are observed in all world societies constitute crucial challenges that closely affect the question of travelling and tourism, raising the question on how

to make use of the land without destroying the natural and cultural resources (Hunter, 1997). As stated indeed Berke (2002) and Bramwell (2009), in the growing field of sustainable tourism, there is the progressive recognition of the importance of social responsibility and ethics, looking at sustainable tourism in a more holistic fashion that recognizes its socio-cultural, economic and political aspects, closer related to the wide concept of sustainable development.

The sub-component of social well-being defined as social actualization correspond to the belief in the evolution of the society and the sense that society has potential which is being realized through institutions and citizens (Keyes, 1998, p. 123). Socially healthy people, continues Keyes, are hopeful about the condition and the future of society, can envision its potentials and are aware of being the potential beneficiaries of social growth. It may be that a higher level of social well-being, especially in the components of social actualization and social coherence (that correspond to a high desire for knowing values, norms and socio-cultural models of the societies), highlights a positive association with the involvement in sustainable tourism (Hunter, 1997), where people are aware of the not unlimited resources of the environments, are willing to respect the social norms, characteristics and other specificities of cultures that people will encounter during tourism activities. Having Keyes demonstrated the growth of social well-being (with the exception of social coherence) in the third age, it may be that those old people that are high in this component of well-being, or in the overall social well-being are more favourable toward forms of sustainable tourism, mostly if they are aware of the intergenerational relevance of their ethic behaviour (see Carmi, 2012, and the concept of “caring about tomorrow”, as a set of different pro-environment behaviours).

Conclusions

The demographic revolution occurring in contemporary societies has brought to the attention the issue of aging population, and especially how to ensure that the largest possible proportion of the population can reach, and maintain, a positive aging. In this article, the tourism behavior, and the environment exploration have been conceived as hallmarks of positive aging, considering the main theoretical perspectives and models that explore the key factors and outcomes of this relevant and desirable condition.

The potential contribution of Positive Psychology on senior tourism can go through a more precise and deeper evaluation of the connections between activities such as traveling and tourism and well-being, in its individual and social meanings and declinations. The probable, hypothesized circularity of the processes that bind the touristic experience with the experience of well-being can constitute, if it will be confirmed in the future, a powerful motivational force for increasing tourism and environment exploration in older people (see Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016, for a meta-analysis of travel motivation of seniors). The elderly who see, or perceive to increase their well-being through traveling experience, are more like to repeat this experience, setting in motion, or reinforcing, their positive experience of well-being. At the same time, it may be possible that there is a specificity of experienced/perceived well-being

for different types of tourism, that could function as driving force towards a specific type of tourism itself. For example, the need for personal growth could lead to choose cultural tourism, nature- tourism or other types of tourism that are characterized by the opportunity of expansion of personal knowledge. At the same time, the increased knowledge can produce an inner perception of competence and personal growth, that are at the basis of eudaimonic well-being, increasing in turn the desire to repeat this experience through the choice of similar tourist destinations.

Keyes (2007) has introduced the concept of *flourishing*, referring to a positive mental health status which included the presence of positive emotions, a good life satisfaction, the actualization of talents and potentials and a constructive and satisfactory relationship with social context. Individuals in a flourishing condition have an inner motivation, are generative and industrious, and present less physical symptoms than those that are not flourishing. Research on flourishing in old age has confirmed its protective function against relevant disease such as cardiovascular problems, diabetes, osteoarthritis (Keyes, 2005). For this reason, a higher well- being produces important effects also on health condition; it may be that traveling and discovering the environment would help the elderly in attaining a flourishing condition, that is, at the same time, promoter of positive mental health and more favorable biological condition.

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