Letter to the Editor

Measurement of successful ageing

The article by Møller and Ferreira (1992) in *SAJG* (Vol.1, No.1) reported on a multiracial survey carried out on successful ageing in South Africa. So far as providing data for cross-cultural comparison purposes is concerned, the study appears to have achieved its intended aim.

However I have a concern about the choice of what the authors call "indicators of successful ageing." Firstly, the Life Satisfaction Index A (LSIA) of Neugarten and her colleagues, published as it was in 1961, has surely been superceded in the past 30 years. An obvious candidate is the Life Satisfaction in the Elderly Scale (LSES) of Salamon and Conte (1984). Due acknowledgement of previous research is given by the compilers of the LSES scale, including research which led to the development of the LSIA. However the compilers were of the opinion that no single instrument up to that time had been universally accepted for the purposes intended. On the basis of their review of earlier work, Salamon and Conte (1984) claim that the LSES incorporates the largest domain yet of items empirically proven to make up the construct of life satisfaction.

The second comment I wish to make is the complete absence of any reference to Erik Erikson, dead now but surely not forgotten. Erikson's publications on life-span development embraced 36 years. It is well-known among gerontologists that the eighth and final "crisis stage" which Erikson described (occurring from the age of about 65 years) is "ego integrity versus despair." My own research completed in 1989 (abstracted in *Thambodala*, 1991) concerned the development of an instrument to measure ego integrity, based purely on the writings of Erikson. Significant correlations were obtained between the dependent variable and eleven aspects of the subjects' life style (the independent variables).

The definition of successful ageing is wide open. Although a definintion can be expected to contain both subjective and objective elements, at the end of the day it boils down to how individuals feel about their circumstances, rather than the actual nature of the circumstances. Intervention to help the "despairing" achieve ego integrity, and so become successful agers, should be the ultimate aim of all research on ageing. The more careful the identification of the factors involved, the more successful this intervention is likely to be.

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Møller and Ferreira reply

We thank Dr Lowis for his interest in our research.

We agree with Lowis that successful ageing is open to interpretation. Indeed, many quality of life researchers share his viewpoint; cases in point are Ryff (1982) and, more recently, Fisher (1992).

The *SAJG* 1992 article entitled "Successful ageing in South Africa: opportunity structures and subjective wellbeing" was first presented at a conference with the theme of "successful ageing". We felt that our presentation, based on information on subjective wellbeing collected for the multidimensional survey of elderly South Africans in 1991/92, fitted the theme of the conference.

The absence of a reference to Erikson on the results of the multidimensional survey was not intentional. For the sake of brevity the research note printed in *SAJG* discussed only the measures used in the study including the Life Satisfaction Index A (LSIA) measure.

We also share Lowis' opinion that individuals themselves are probably the best assessors of their success in ageing. How a person feels about life, is probably the most telling indicator of quality of life. Based on this conviction, we made extensive use of self-report measures of life satisfaction, such as LSIA, to assess the life circumstances of the South African elderly in the multidimensional survey.

The writer is correct in suggesting that we reviewed a number of measures for their possible inclusion in the multidimensional survey. The choice was a difficult one. There are many measures of life satisfaction currently in use. It is known that most measures are fairly robust and compare well at the aggregate level (Wood, Wylie & Shaefer, 1969; Lohmann, 1977, 1980; Larson, 1978; Diener, 1984). Therefore, the choice of a suitable measure rests with the researcher, and much depends on the task at hand.

Why was LSIA applied in the multidimensional study and not another measure such as LSES? In South Africa the validity of most standard measures of life satisfaction developed in Western contexts has not been established, therefore the choice was wide open.

For the multidimensional study, the choice of research instruments was mainly a practical consideration. The research team required measures for international comparison purposes and ones that were also sufficiently familiar to them to ensure adequate interpretation. The LSIA measure, which is widely used in gerontological research, met these two criteria.

In the first instance the research team selected two single-item measures which have been tested in earlier studies using

large representative national samples. The two single-item measures, which appeared to discriminate well between the population groups, served as familiar "anchors". In addition, we used several multi-item measures including the LSIA.

The purpose of the multidimensional survey of South African elderly was to establish a data base rather than conduct a psychological assessment. Therefore, it was important that our measure of life satisfaction would discriminate between aggregates of people rather that accurately assess individual satisfaction. To put it bluntly, any measure that discriminated between major groupings of South African society would have served our purposes well.

We concur that LSES might have represented a sound choice had our goal been intervention at the individual level to overcome desperation and to gain ego integrity. We acknowledge the usefulness of the concept of ego integrity. The concept has been used as an analytical tool in other work (e.g. Møller, 1992).

However the South African multidimensional study was modelled on southeast Asian studies which used LSIA as their indicator of life satisfaction. We suspect that LSIA was the southeast Asian researchers' choice based on what we have called the "familiarity" criterion – given their affiliations to institutions which have extensively used and analyzed the instrument (Adams, 1969; Laing, 1984). Given our intention to compare the results from the South African survey with other cross-cultural studies, the choice of LSIA was close at hand.

Regarding the familiarity criterion, the items which make up the LSIA have been applied in earlier studies of elderly black South African retirees (N=250) (Møller, 1985). We therefore felt assured that the items would work well in a cross-cultural research setting. We also felt reasonably confident that we were capable of interpreting our results with the sensitivity born of experience. We sincerely hope that this was the case.

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