The VLV survey: An interdisciplinary survey addressing progress and equalities of life conditions in the aged population of Switzerland

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Context
Over the last century, Switzerland has witnessed an increase in life expectancy at birth by over 30 years, a trend that has increased in the proportion of people aged 65 and older, and an eightfold increase in the percentage of persons aged 80 years and older. These demographic changes have led to a growing gap between the “young-old”, the “old-old”, and the “oldest-old”, with the negative aspects of aging being postponed from the so-called “third” to the “fourth age.”

Still, advancing age is not the only factor accounting for differences in life conditions, functional health and well-being among aging adults. Indeed some categories of aging individuals appear more fragile and vulnerable than others, among them women, immigrants, and individuals belonging to lower socio-economical classes.

These changes have carried along important issues about the opportunities of the aging process, that is, the possibilities for political participation, productivity, and social integration of aging adults.

Societies coping with an increasingly old population need an updated description of the life conditions of aging individuals, not only to understand its evolution in the past, but also to estimate its trends for the future, in the aim to best maintain the health, autonomy, and well being of aging adults.

VLV aims at addressing the actual life and health conditions of individuals aged 65 and above living in Switzerland, with a special focus on:
- the changes that occurred across the last three decades
- heterogeneity, diversity and vulnerability in aging

Continuity with previous surveys
"Vivre / Leben / Vivere" (VLV) is the third transversal wave of a survey launched in 1979 and replicated in 1994/5, which allows a 30-year depth comparison of the life and health conditions of the aged population in the areas under investigation.

Organizational diagram of VLV
VLV embeds interconnected sub-projects which specifically target physical (B) and psychological (C) health, as well as social relations and participations (D). An additional focus is placed on immigrant populations (E) and on methodological issues (F).

Conceputal framework
The overall framework calls upon the interdisciplinary concept of “resources”. The current available resources are meant to be accumulated over life trajectories, and used to manage life conditions. Trajectories, resources, practices, social politics and values participate to qualify individual well-being.

Method
The sample was randomly selected in the cantonal and federal Swiss administrations’ records.

The survey is anchored in Geneva, but local survey centers are established in each canton and run by bilingual on-site field coordinators.

Data are collected through:
- A self-assessed Questionnaire (OA) and a face-to-face Questionnaire (OFF) administered using the CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interview) method
- A self-assessed Life History Calendar (LHC)
- The material was initially constructed in French, but was subsequently translated:
  - In German and in Italian, for the data collection in BE/BS/BL, and TI, respectively
  - In Spanish, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian and Albanian for the immigrant over-sample

 VLV constituted a great – and even unique in Europe – opportunity to assess the effect of the socio-historical context and the evolution of the aged population over the past 30 years

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The survey has been approved by the following ethical committees:
- HCPP d’UFCG (Faculté de psychologie et des sciences de l’information en santé) in Geneva
- HCPP de l’EPFL
- CRB, CRN et CRSS (Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology)
- IRB – University of Genoa

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As a whole, VLV allows:
- providing cardinal updated information on the availability and use of the current resources of the aged population; in addition, hints on how the current resources are constituted are gathered through the data collected by means of life calendars
- addressing specifically the question of the heterogeneity of aging by identifying the conditions and factors contributing to these variations. The concept of interplaying resources provides a mean to grasp the variability reported in aging conditions.
- questioning the future trends of the transformations reported so far, and in particular, whether these will continue or not. A comparison with the data collected in previous surveys and an account taken on different cohort characteristics is of great interest in pursuing this aim.

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Sample
VLV is conducted in five different areas, targeting the three linguistic parts of Switzerland. A total of 3900 individuals is included in the main sample (i.e. 720 in each area). An oversample of 100 linked lives (i.e. partners) in GE, and 480 immigrants from Spain and Portugal in GE; from Italy and En-Vayagnes in BS/BL, N=120, each, aged 65 to 79.

The regions were selected on the basis of: a) reproducibility of the 1979 and 1994 surveys, b) heterogeneity, including different linguistic (German, French, and Italian) and geographic (urban, rural, alpine) areas and c) their potential to capture the effects of different social policy systems regarding the elderly in the complex Swiss Federal State