

Attention in old age: a comparison between institutionalized and non institutionalized elderly

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The variability of cognitive functions is very different in specific abilities and in different subjects, according to age and task difficulty. This variability prevents the formulation of a generalised trend. As far as attention is concerned, if a reduction in the latter's efficiency occurs, the performance level ought to be related with the complexity of the task and with the memory load that it requires. Moreover, a consideration of the role of automatic and controlled processes and their efficiency is essential. Of course, contextual and situational variables are involved in the cognitive and emotional modifications of the elderly, but as far as their role is concerned there is no full agreement and in particular, there is widespread debate regarding the influence of institutionalisation.

The present research compares the efficiency of attentional performance in institutionalised and non-institutionalised elderly. To this end, the battery 'Attention and Concentration' was administered. The latter is composed of 7 test trails measuring the following: 1) simple reaction times; 2) reaction times based on multiple choice stimuli; 3) recognition of auditory, visual and spatial targets; 4) digit span; 5) divided attention (double task test); 6) word colour interference (Stroop test); 7) attention shifting with both verbal and visual targets.

The research sample is composed of 120 elderly, 60 males and 60 females, free of significant physical or psychological pathologies, with age ranging from 65 to 96 years. Half of the subjects (30 females and 30 males) are institutionalised. To analyse the data, an analysis of covariance was conducted, considering for each variable of the attention battery the institutionalisation condition as the main independent variable, while sex and age were considered as covariants (by splitting up the sample according to median level below or above the age limit of 75).

The results confirm the hypothesis that attentional performance is less efficient in institutionalised elderly, even if this reduction cannot be fully attributed to institutionalisation in itself. However, a relationship is in fact established between institutionalisation and reduced attentional efficiency. The factorial structure verified allows the differentiation of attentional abilities more or less complex and of attentional inefficiency related to errors rather than to omission, characterising two different attitudes displayed towards the attentional stimuli: active or passive.

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