

Transcript

Professor George Leeson

Welcome to the Ageing Conversation, a series of podcasts from the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing at the University of Oxford. I am Professor George Leeson, Senior Professorial Fellow at the Institute. The Oxford Institute of Population Ageing is now celebrating nearly 30 years. It was the first institute to move away from looking at old age per se and instead to examine the implications for societies, economies, political systems and indeed the wider global community of the profound demographic shifts brought about by falling fertility and increasing longevity. We are a multidisciplinary institute and the topics presented in this podcast series reflect the breadth of expertise exploring different aspects of population ageing, past, present and future. Each of these podcasts features an interview conducted by one of our research fellows and I'm delighted that the current series features Dr Chiara Foccaci and Dr Kate Bancroft. The opinions expressed by the interviewees do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

Chiara Foccaci

Welcome to the podcast series of the Institute of Population Ageing at the University of Oxford. In this series, we're going to look at interesting aspects of why we age the way we age. And the next episode is hosted by my colleague Dr. Kate Bancroft. Let's dive in.

Kate Bancroft

Okay, so I am joined today by my lovely colleague, Dr Chiara Foccaci. So welcome to the podcast. We're here today to talk about your paper. So could we start much by talking about the title of it and how you decided to research this particular topic, please?

Chiara Foccaci

Yes, so the title of the research is Social Expectations and Technology Engagement in Older Adults. It's a joint work with scholars from other universities abroad. So with Pak Hung Lam and William Darity from Duke University and Peter Massini from Erasmus University Rotterdam. So the idea came up because I'm particularly interested in human capital investment, reskilling and technological revolutions. And in parallel, I'm also interested in ageing, obviously. And so the idea was how can we combine the two, given that we live in a digital society, given that there is this stigma of older adults not being interested in technology or not being able to comprehend it. And we instead hypothesized that there might be an interest and willingness to participate in this digital society. But that's actually what can influence the decision to want to learn and use

technology are actually the social expectations on behalf of other members of the society.

Kate Bancroft

So did you recognise that there was a kind of ageist presumption that older adults weren't interested in technology and everyone was just stereotyping that group of people together with that?

Chiara Foccaci

Yeah, so there is evidence that in general when we are in front of a learning opportunity, we care more about how others make us feel about learning in that particular environment, especially if we join a learning environment with peers that are not of our group, for instance, older adults joining a class where they're also younger adults. And so the idea is how can we create intergenerational opportunities that on the one hand create benefits, cognitive benefits, but also social benefits for older adults to be more included in the society. And on the other hand, how can we fight ageist attitudes and intergenerational opportunities are a good means to achieve that.

Kate Bancroft

So you're kind of the background reading had suggested that people were not so worried about learning the task, but more worried about how they'd be perceived by others also learning the task at the same time.

Chiara Foccaci

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. So there is evidence that, for instance, older adults who learn for instance, with younger people also within the family are more confident in using the technology. We wanted to do something a bit different in the sense that there is little evidence on experiments that look at how social expectations in particular affect this decision. And so on the one hand, we wanted to see what happens if we treat individuals with negative expectations on behalf of other participants in the class who come from and have different age ages. And then what happens if we treat them with positive social expectations? So an environment that makes adults feel welcomed and gives them sort of the confidence to embark on this new learning adventure. And of course, it's not just about social expectations. And in particular, in our case, we argue that words and a simple conversation can change our decision to join or not a program. But it's also obviously about self-image, how we perceive ourselves. And because of these ageist attitudes, some people might have absorbed these ageist attitudes towards themselves. And so it's a mix of feelings that come from either the outside world or within ourselves, let's say.

Kate Bancroft

Amazing. So was there a particular hypothesis that you were testing or just an open-ended research question or?

Chiara Foccaci

Yeah, so mainly, as I was explaining, we were interested in understanding whether social expectations have an effect on the decision to participate in a learning program about technology, but also to use the technology within that learning environment. And the idea is we want to create, of course, this is an experiment that is hypothetical. It does not reflect necessarily the society. But the idea is we want for older adults to be able to use these technologies within the broader society. So think about going to the supermarket where you have this self checkout cash that's not even I understand fully or, you know, it's not just about answering the phone, but it's digital tools are everywhere in society and so are social expectations. So we're always every day expected to behave in a certain way, especially when segments of the society are expected to have prescribed behaviors. So our hypothesis was these social expectations are going to have an impact on behavior on the one hand, together with, of course, the emotional component of the self-image that I was talking about before. But yeah, in general is the idea of how can we leverage social expectations to motivate older adults to learn and use technology within an engaging learning environment. And we wanted this learning environment to not be online because we wanted to create an environment that is similar to the reality and not just connecting to Zoom or yes, using the computer to do other activities. And one last point that is interesting is that this whole idea came up because there are lots and lots of programs that want to focus on investment in human capital and therefore also digital literacy at the European level. But they mostly focus on older adults with older adults. let's say that they see older adults as a target group, which is fair. But again, our interest was how can we create an environment where it's more intergenerational?

Kate Bancroft

Fascinating. So what methods did you use for this particular project and what was your sample size?

Chiara Foccaci

Yes, so we are still in the process of collecting data. We just carried out a pilot study to see if our hypothesis made sense. And we used an online experiment. So we created a survey on Qualtrics And then we hired participants through Prolific and we focused particularly on the UK and on older adults above 70. We had a control group and then we had two treatment groups. One treatment group received positive social expectations and the other received negative social expectations. So there is a mix of wanting to basically collect data directly from the participants and use behavioral hypotheses to sort of support the idea that social expectations change the way we

make decisions. Of course, this is an online experiment, so it's not carried out on the field, but there is enough evidence to support the idea that online experiments are valid as well.

Kate Bancroft

Interesting. So in terms of the social expectations, was it that some of the questions were phrased in a way that you might find this hard, but almost negative expectation in the way that the question was?

Chiara Foccaci

So the idea is that words can go a long way. So the words that we use in everyday life can impact other people's behavior. And so we had in the social expectation treatment groups, positive and negative, we had positive and negative reinforcement on behalf of other students. So older adults knew that they would join a class to learn about a technology and potentially use a voice assistance device, if they needed to. And this was accompanied by an attitude that was positive from students. So we had a series of words that were, for instance, encouraging the use of technology for older adults. claiming that older adults should use them and you know they're confident and they make them independent and then we had a negative treatment group where students were doing the opposite so they were claiming older adults should not use technologies only frail and not self-sufficient older adults need to use assistant devices so we played with words to achieve that yeah interesting.

Kate Bancroft

So just to be a little bit critical to get under the surface, was there any risk that any of these questions or the training being framed in a way that was particularly kind of low expectations could cause any harm to the participants even after the experiment? Or were they, I guess they weren't told that this is what's happening.

Chiara Foccaci

Yeah, so I mean, before we conducted the experiment, of course, we sought for ethical approval. So we had an ethical board that looked at each of the questions and approved them so I think the risk of harming them in that case was very low and we actually received positive feedback from participants because Qualtrics allows you to receive comments afterwards and older adults were very interested in the research and actually agreed with some of the ageist stereotypes that they encountered during their daily life.

Kate Bancroft

Yeah interesting so did they say that they'd picked up on some of the ageist kind of, did they notice as such?

Chiara Foccaci

Yeah, I mean, I think if you, even if you speak to older adults in the streets, at least once a week, they probably would have encountered an ageist attitude on behalf of people from other segments of the population. And there is this stigma that says that basically older adults are not able to use technologies, they're not interested. And while it might be the case for a small portion of the population, in reality, if you talk to people, there is this willingness. It's just how do we achieve that? And social expectations play a big role in this.

Kate Bancroft

It's really, really interesting. So is there also a slight bias in that older adults that were recruited on Prolific, which is like a recruitment tool just for the listeners that don't know for research today? they have already had a certain level of competence, or does that not matter because you were learning a new technological skill in the experiment?

Chiara Foccaci

Yeah, absolutely. This is one of the limitations of the studies that obviously we selected people necessarily in the sense that it's only people who have access to a computer who can participate in this. experiment. However we actually controlled for past experience in using assistive devices which was the main topic of the experiment and there was a balance across all groups. So there is a certain compromise of course when using online surveys but in our case we were interested in a specific use of a specific technology.

Kate Bancroft

And so most importantly, what did you find out then? What was the outcome?

Chiara Foccaci

So this is my favourite part as well. So we found for the moment, because as I said, this is a preliminary study and we have to collect more data. But what we see at the moment is that positive social expectations do have a positive effect, which sort of supports the idea that social capital is an essential means to achieve positive outcomes such as intergenerational learning and a more inclusive digital society. And obviously that when we think about the carrot versus stick game, let's say, using positive incentives sometimes is better than using negative incentives. And of course, in this case, what we see is that if we create an environment that is making older adults confident and welcomed in learning opportunities and learning new ways of using technologies, then we can achieve a more inclusive society as well.

Kate Bancroft

With the intergenerational element, what did you find out about that? Did that mechanism work or?

Chiara Foccaci

So in our case, we did not measure specifically intergenerational effects, but we can see that in a class of students that have different ages, this works. And it's not very common to have these intergenerational environments. It's more common perhaps in certain parts of the world, for instance, southern cultures where the intergenerational bonding is natural and it's done on an everyday basis. But it's something that definitely needs focus on behalf also of policy institutions.

Kate Bancroft

And is this published or under review at the moment?

Chiara Foccaci

No, this is still in progress.

Kate Bancroft

So what would you like to do next now that you've learned this? Would you like to trial it on a bigger scale?

Chiara Foccaci

Yeah, the idea is to carry it out on a larger scale, obviously, because we want this little experiment to be as representative as possible. And then, of course, there are so many ways of looking at it, and we focus on the UK and the cultural component is so important when we think about social expectations, because it changes our behavior. And so I'm sure that if we were to carry out the experiment in Italy or somewhere else, the results might be different. So it's important also to take into account this aspect.

Kate Bancroft

Okay, I've asked 12 more minutes. Is that okay? I don't know how much of your time I have. And so Could you just tell us a bit about your academic journey? So what did you do before you came here?

Chiara Foccaci

I did economics, then I did economic history, and then I did economics and law. And I've always managed to find a way to create a connection and a thread between all these disciplines. And for me, it's so important to look at one aspect from different perspectives. And it was an interdisciplinary division, the one where I was, and I always

looked for interdisciplinary opportunities and departments and this one in Oxford, is absolutely fantastic.

Kate Bancroft

Well, thank you so much for fitting in this time and know how busy you are. So really do appreciate it.

Chiara Foccaci

Thank you for the interesting questions and it was a pleasure to talk to you.

Kate Bancroft

Thank you. Bye Cara. Bye.