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SI-ALT

Police and age: Fostering the subjective sense of security of older and very old men and women in public spaces

SI-ALT deals with the challenges which police officers will face in the coming decades due to demographic change and an ageing society. They are increasingly being assigned tasks which they, as contact persons in public spaces, have to manage using strong communication skills. One group which should be given special attention to facilitate its participation in public life is that of the older and very old adults. A possible explanation for the withdrawal of older adults is a lack of a subjective sense of security. Although there are national and international surveys on the population's subjective sense of security, little is known about how the subjective sense of security of older adults presents itself at a detailed level and how this population group can be taken into account in police work. This gap in research is closed by SI-ALT. In the framework of this project quantitative and qualitative surveys were conducted in three pilot regions agreed upon with the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) on the perspectives of older and very old adults as well as police officers regarding security in public spaces. The aim of the project was to develop products based on these surveys that make a valuable contribution to prevention and communication efforts and to the way in which police officers deal with older and very old people. This article outlines the project's procedure, gives an overview of the data collection methods and presents the products developed. The project, funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT) within the framework of the security research funding programme KIRAS, was carried out by the Security Research Network (the queraum. cultural and social research and the Competence Centre for Empirical Research Methods of the Vienna University of Economics and Business) in cooperation with the Department of Sociology at the University of Vienna (with an emphasis on social gerontology) and the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior.

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

On the concept of public spaces

“Public space” is a broad and elusive concept. In everyday language, it refers to streets, pavements, squares, parks, public transport and the like, and assumes general

accessibility and usability. However, this very accessibility and usability are subject to conditions and limitations, with certain groups and their needs being systematically excluded. Participation in public spaces is therefore not possible to the same extent for all groups, and their use or non-use is shaped by certain milieu-specific or group-



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specific factors. The current research assumed that most activities of older adults take place in the immediate or close vicinity of their living environment (see Oswald/Konopik 2015), therefore public spaces are understood to be largely synonymous with the neighbourhood and the immediate living environment.

On the concept of security

In the SI-ALT project, the types of security that have no relationship to crime (e.g. social security, traffic safety, legal certainty) play no role. Some specifications should be made regarding the spatial and social dimensions of security: in the spatial dimension, a distinction is made in principle between internal and external state security, and in the social dimension, between subjective and objective security (Frevel 2016). Subjective research only refers to inner security at the spatial level and to subjective security in the social dimension. Based on a modern security concept, we therefore assume a concept of security determined in a relationally negative manner. Accordingly, security is a defined state characterised by the absence of the fear of crime, i.e. the anxiety, fear or worry about becoming a victim of a criminal act.

The objective security situation and the subjective sense of security of older and very old men and women

In Austria, older men and women live in relatively safe conditions. Although objective security in the sense of reduction in crime is increasing, these developments are not always reflected in the subjective assessment of the population. The increase in subjective security is one of the six focal points of the Austrian strategy INNEN.SICHER of the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2017). There are several surveys that

deal with the subjective sense of security of the population in Austria. Nevertheless, little is known about how the sense of security of older adults presents itself at a detailed level and how older population groups can best be taken into account in police work.

Increasing challenges for police officers in public spaces

In addition to being responsible for ensuring “law and order”, police officers are also contact persons (see Kreissl et al. 2008) whose practices determine the state of well-being of their users in public spaces. In order to increase the population’s sense of security, police officers need communication skills that take into account the respective target groups and their psychological and physical conditions and needs. The SI-ALT project identified and analysed these communication requirements and developed materials to fulfil these requirements.

Existing measures mainly focus on protecting older people against criminal activities. However, little is known about how, for example, police officers deal with the needs of older and very old men and women in public spaces. In particular, there is a lack of measures for “mainstreaming ageing” in police work.

2. METHOD AND SCIENTIFIC SOLUTION APPROACH

SI-ALT followed a practice-oriented, mixed-methods approach, which combined qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The results were translated directly into practice, tested and evaluated. The research design consisted of (1) a “research” phase and (2) a “product development” phase. At the same time, measures ensuring quality assurance were taken to integrate the needs and target groups.

Source: Mayr et al. 2018

	Questionnaire	Interview/ group discussion	Focus groups	Focus groups
	older adults	older adults	Police officer(s)	older adults Police officer(s)
Tamsweg	114	12	3	3 + 2
Bruck a.d. Mur	184	11	5	11 + 3
Vienna	458	25	4	30 + 4
Total	756	48	12	44 + 9

Table 1: Survey methods and sample by region

2.1. Research and survey phase

Comprehensive data collection took place in three pilot regions defined by the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior at the beginning of the project (Tamsweg, Bruck a.d. Mur and Vienna). This phase served to provide both a representative database and a deeper understanding of the underlying concerns, frustrations, insecurities and experiences of older and very old men and women as well as police officers when dealing with each other. The following survey methods were used in the project:

1. Questionnaire on the subjective sense of security of older adults,
2. Interviews and group discussions with older adults on the topics of (a) subjective sense of security and (b) experiences with police officers,
3. Focus group discussions with police officers on their experiences and challenges in dealing with older adults in public spaces,
4. Focus group discussions with older adults and police officers on the topic of security in public spaces and prevention possibilities.

A total of 756 older adults were surveyed by means of questionnaires in the three pilot regions; 48 older adults took part in an interview or a group discussion. Twelve police officers agreed to participate in focus group discussions about their experiences with the older and very old age groups. Across all pilot regions, 44 older men and women and nine police officers

participated in focus group discussions, which considered the topics of security and prevention possibilities. These discussions also served as a reciprocal transfer of specific knowledge and demonstrated how the survey method was also used as an intervention method with a view to promoting communication between the two target groups.

2.2. Product development

The data obtained from the various methodological approaches formed the basis for products contributing to prevention and communication work and to the interaction of police officers with older and very old adults and are outlined subsequently.

2.2.1 “Sense of security of older men and women in public spaces” barometer

Instrument used

The data from the quantitative survey were evaluated statistically; the following factors, in particular, guided the evaluation: age and generations, social space and density of settlement, state of health and mobility, experience of crime and objective risk potential as well as the perception of police work.

The questionnaire considers six aspects: (1) neighbourhood, (2) fear of crime, (3) indirect and direct victimisation and coping skills, (4) attitudes towards the police, (5) health, quality of life and notions of old age and (6) socio-demographic data. It starts with a set of questions on the neighbourhood, in which the selection of

Source: Kolland et al. 2018c

	Vienna	Bruck a.d. Mur	Tamsweg	Total:
Type of housing				
– Private household	90%	89%	90%	90%
– Retirement home	10%	11%	10%	10%
Gender				
– Male	40%	40%	38%	40%
– Female	60%	60%	62%	60%
Age				
– 65 to 79	78%	66%	75%	75%
– 80+	22%	34%	25%	25%
Educational background				
– Compulsory schooling/ apprenticeship/mid-level vocational education	52%	69%	74%	60%
– General secondary educa- tion/high-level vocational education/master craftsman	28%	19%	18%	25%
– University degree	19%	12%	8%	15%
	458	184	114	756

Table 2: Sample description by place of residence and socio-demographic characteristics

questions is oriented towards concepts for measuring local or neighbourhood social capital (Lüdemann 2006). The transition to the core topic is perceived social disorder in the neighbourhood, based on the classic incivilities and disorder concepts (Häfele 2013). Fear of crime was surveyed, on the one hand, using the standard indicators “during the day” and “at night” and, on the other, using the three-dimensional model (Hohage 2004). Questions were then asked about direct and indirect victimisation experiences (Boers 2002; Hale 1996) and about situational coping skills (Studer 2014). The fourth set of questions was about the attitude towards the police. The last contents section consisted of a series of questions on the topics of health, quality of life and notions of old age. Finally, the questionnaire concluded with questions on the socio-demographic data of the older and very old respondents.

Sample

In order to achieve the representativeness of the sample for the three populations (Tamsweg, Bruck a.d. Mur and Vienna), not only persons living in private

households were interviewed face-to-face but also residents of retirement homes who still regularly use public spaces. Various sampling methods were combined to favour representativeness. The random route procedure was used to select persons in private households, whereas persons in retirement homes were selected by cluster sampling.

Table 2 shows the sample distributions by place of residence and type of housing as well as by the characteristics gender, age and highest level of education obtained.

Results of the quantitative survey:

Security barometer

A security barometer was compiled based on the evaluations of the questionnaire surveys in the three pilot regions. This consisted of (1) an analysis report (Kolland et al. 2018a) and (2) a manual (Kolland et al. 2018b).

The analysis report presented the evaluations of the three pilot regions in detail. The quantitative data analysis shows that the very old do not have a higher level of fear than older adults and that the level of fear does not increase with age. Rather,

gender plays an essential role: in contrast to men, women feel more insecure in their neighbourhood at night and also take more security measures. Other decisive explanatory factors for the fear of crime are, on the one hand, the place of residence and, on the other, the perception of the situation in the living environment. People in rural areas have a higher sense of security than those in semi-rural and urban areas, which, on the one hand, has something to do with a lower perception of physical and social disorder, but, on the other, also with higher satisfaction with the neighbourhood in semi-rural and rural spaces.

The results regarding attitudes towards the police are also insightful. A clear majority of respondents have a positive image of officers, which is reflected both on an abstract level (general satisfaction with the police and assessment of the qualities of police officers) and in the direct contact with police officers. However, the results of the multivariate analysis require some interpretation: it could thus be determined that higher satisfaction with the police correlates with higher fear of crime. One possible explanation would be that more anxious people are happy to have what they consider to be good police. Besides the living environment, neighbourhood and satisfaction with the police, subjective vulnerability in old age also plays an important role. People who rate their state of health as bad are often more afraid of being victimised and consider this more likely.

As well as guidance for future surveys on the sense of security of older and very old men and women in individual model regions, federal states or throughout Austria as a whole, the manual also includes information on both the quality of the scales to be used and recommended evaluations.

2.2.2 “Communicating with older and very old men and women in public spaces” guideline

Social participation in public life can contribute to an active, meaningful and healthy life in old age. An essential prerequisite for this participation is designing public space that, on principle, takes into account the mobility opportunities for older and very old adults. However, the kind of social interactions in public spaces is also crucial to such participation: familiar environments, familiar faces and small communication rituals help older adults feel safe. Negative or unpleasant experiences in public spaces with other users and/or with security actors may lead to public spaces not being considered opportunities for participation, but rather as barriers. Last but not least, police officers can contribute to a positive sense of security in older adults, their behaviour thus becomes a condition of older people’s opportunity to participate in public life.

The qualitative surveys (interviews, group discussions, experience workshops) with older adults showed that a subjective sense of security is influenced above all by (1) dispositional anxiety and (2) the place of residence. Situations in the public space which provoke insecurity are mainly related to frustrations such as encountering large groups of people (especially in the pilot region Bruck a.d. Mur) and darkness (in Vienna, especially in the area of the underground). Police presence in public spaces helps people feel more secure. Police officers are primarily perceived as actors of the executive who often establish a hierarchical relationship through their communication practices.

Focus group discussions with police officers showed that there are no specific insecurities regarding communication and interaction with the group of older and very old adults, but communication in

public spaces with people whose actions and reactions are difficult to assess, as may be the case with those suffering from dementia or psychosis, for example, is certainly considered challenging.

Against the background of these findings, communication aspects became central to the guideline (queraum. kultur- und sozialforschung 2018a). At the same time, the wishes of the Federal Police Academy (SIAK) representatives were fulfilled and the guideline contains references to theory-based content; in particular, theories from philology and linguistics were taken into account in its creation. The content of the guideline is aimed at (prospective) security actors – and in particular at (future) police officers – who are interested in successful encounters with older adults in public spaces and in improving the sense of security of older and very old adults and thus wish to contribute to a living environment appropriate for them.

2.2.3 “Practical training for dealing with older and very old men and women on the topic of security in public spaces” curriculum

The data from the qualitative surveys were analysed by topic and show that a perceived power relationship comes to the fore when communicating with police officers. When creating the practical training, special attention was therefore paid to sensitising (prospective) police officers to this perception and to conveying corresponding communication strategies. The guideline developed served as a basis for this. Selected content from the guideline is shown separately in the curriculum (queraum. kultur- und sozialforschung 2018b). Special attention was paid to ensuring the practical training used multiple methodologies and didactics and that the content was conveyed in a manner adapted to the target group.

The modules on “Communication with different target groups (65 plus)” aim to sensitise (prospective) police officers to the fact that different social groups represent different requirements, needs, expectations and values and that the consideration of these aspects is a prerequisite for a respectful approach and for creating a subjective sense of security. The stereotyping of groups made here is dealt with on the basis of theoretical principles in four modules with a total of 14 teaching units. One advantage of the modular design is the possibility to consolidate two or more modules in practice when teaching.

This module of the curriculum, which aims to enable perspective adoption by wearing age simulation suits, was tested in March 2018 in basic police training. Written feedback forms and two feedback interviews were used to evaluate the test: opinions regarding practicality were gathered following the test in a reflection session in plenary from the point of view of the participating police cadets. The feedback from the participants and the SIAK representatives present showed that the method of using age simulation suits appears to be too costly both financially and organisationally. The participants wished to find occasions when older adults could describe their experiences, frustrations, needs and challenges directly to (young) police officers; this was taken into account when adapting the curriculum and was implemented in Module 4 “Explorative learning”.

The final curriculum consists of the modules (1) Older and very old adults as a growing and heterogeneous group, (2) Common health conditions, (3) Age and language and (4) Explorative learning. It includes descriptions to ensure that trainers for basic police training have sufficient information on the content of the lessons. These descriptions relate to the module

contents, the desired learning outcomes (competences), possible didactic methods and literature recommendations. There is also a PowerPoint presentation for each module which summarises the main topics.

3. CONCLUSION

The results of the data collected in the SI-ALT project show that experiences of insecurity of older and very old people play a role, especially in urban, but also in semi-rural areas. In addition to local integration and the perceived disorder phenomena, which were mainly used in the quantitative analyses to explain the fear of crime, the qualitative surveys found that social contacts and the perceived attention of actors present in public spaces in particular contribute to fostering the subjective sense of security of older and very old people.

Above all, the quantitative findings show that the majority of the older adults surveyed have a positive image of officers, which is reflected both on an abstract level (general satisfaction with the police and assessment of the qualities of police officers) and on a concrete level (direct contact with police officers). The qualitative findings give three reasons for the assumption that there are insecurities on both sides (the older adults as well as police officers) regarding dealing with each other. Firstly, although the focus group discussions with police officers showed that there are no specific insecurities regarding communication and interaction with the group of older and very old adults, communication in public spaces with people whose actions and reactions are difficult to assess, as may be the case with those suffering from dementia or psychosis, for example, is certainly considered challenging. Secondly, police officers are primarily perceived by older adults as actors of the executive who often establish a hierarchi-

cal relationship through their communication practices. Thirdly, police officers, and older adults say that older and very old people are often unsure about when to contact the police or what tasks the police are responsible for. All these reasons ultimately relate to communicative and linguistic aspects; target-group-specific training for police officers can help officers develop practices that meet the needs of different groups of people in public spaces and thus have a positive impact on the subjective sense of security.

The “Security barometer” product can, if used widely, provide evidence-based information as to which regions would need Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior security measures to be boosted in order to improve not only the objective but also the subjective security situation of the civilian population.

As a rule, measures ensuring security in certain regions also necessitate information for those tasked with the implementation of specific strategies. The “Guidelines” and “Curriculum” products created in the project are suitable for use in basic and further police training as well as for being issued to those who wish to deal with the subject on their own and educate themselves further (e.g. security officers in communities). First and foremost, they are aimed at the police, but may also be used by other organisations that have to act and respond in public spaces. Thus, the use of the documents in other emergency services, such as the rescue service or the fire brigade, is also a possibility. The use of materials as support for education and training is also conceivable in non-profit organisations (e.g. the Austrian Red Cross, ÖAMTC [Austrian Automobile, Motorcycle and Touring Club], SOS Mitmensch, Volkshilfe, etc).

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