

Section 1

Concepts, theory, and measures of mental and cognitive health

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Population aging has been described as a human success story, reflecting the advancement of public health, medicine, and economic and social development, and the impact of these advances on the reduction in the risk of death. It has also been described as one of the four “mega-trends” that characterize the global population of today—population growth, population aging, urbanization and international migration (United Nations, 2020). On the other hand, population aging brings additional challenges such as an increasing number of older adults with chronic diseases and functional disability, including cognitive decline, dementia and other mental health problems. These will likely increase the need for health care services.

In 2015, an estimated 46.8 million people worldwide were living with dementia. This number will almost double every 20 years, reaching 74.7 million in 2030 and 131.5 million in 2050. This is particularly relevant as demand for services will also increase, but it is unlikely that full coverage of dementia health care services will be available or affordable can be attained or afforded using the current specialist care model (Prince et al., 2016).

While aging research has increased exponentially in the last decades, research on mental and cognitive health is still lacking. The 2018 World Alzheimer Report included a general revision of relevant research in related areas such as diagnosis, treatments and risk reduction and concluded that there is an urgent need for increased funding in neurodegenerative disorders like dementia, as it only represents a fraction of what is spent on other chronic non-communicable diseases such as cancer and diabetes (Patterson, 2018).

The volume *New Frontiers in Understanding the Context of Cognitive Aging: Mexico and the United States* starts out setting the broad stage of mental and cognitive health of older adults in Mexico and older Hispanics or Latinos in the United States. This with the objective of following the focus of our second Mexico-U.S. bridging Conference *Framing Challenges in Cognitive and Mental Health Care in Mexican origin Older Adults in Mexico and the U.S.*, which was jointly organized by the Mexican National Institute of Geriatrics (INGER) and the International Conference of Aging in the Americas (ICAA). The main objective of the meeting was to identify public policies and strategies that are in place to support aging mental health

and care in both countries, their scope, and what is necessary to achieve optimal care and support in later life for these conditions. The meeting also addressed the different concepts, theories and instruments of mental and cognitive health measurements as well as their social determinants.

Section One of the volume includes four chapters and aims to provide readers with a conceptual foundation on the links between mental and physical health and quality of life of older adults, regarding the measurements of cognitive and mental health, as well as health needs and the use of mental health services.

In the first chapter, Arteaga Bracho and colleagues focus on the challenges of the assessment of cognitive domains in low literacy populations, and its estimation in an elderly cohort born in 1945 or earlier in the city of Maracaibo, Venezuela. The study determines whether neuropsychological tests measure the same cognitive constructs across different educational levels in healthy adult Hispanics. Results indicate that memory, speed of processing, language, and visual-spatial abilities are latent factors identifiable from cognitive assessment in this population and emphasizes how future, cross-national studies will help to improve our understanding of dissimilar results regarding cognitive performance.

This chapter is followed by a study focusing on the role of discrimination in the use of mental health services by the Latino population in the United States by Padilla-Frausto and Wallace. Specifically, the study examines the effect of anti-Latino discrimination in the use of mental health-related services, and examines if the effects differed by age group, socioeconomic characteristics such as marital status, educational attainment and health insurance, as well as need for service. Interestingly, their results show that while Latinos may not meet criteria for a diagnosable disorder, they are indeed seeking help for mental health problems, suggesting that more preventive efforts are needed. In addition, they show how adequate services are needed not just for those with a clearly diagnosable disorder, but also for those dealing with major life stressors such as discrimination, where reducing stigma becomes a highly relevant factor.

The chapter by Sosa and colleagues presents an overall review of mental health in older adults, with an emphasis on the most frequent disorders in this population such as depression, anxiety, and dementia. In addition, the chapter introduces crucial links between mental and physical health, how these differ throughout the lifespan and the bidirectional relation of these links (i.e., from mental to physical and from physical to mental health), and how in many cases they co-exist. Moreover, the authors importantly indicate that beyond these interactions, their impact on health-related quality of life is significant. In the last section of the chapter, public health challenges and the need for holistic care management strategies, including the implementation of evidence-based interventions are presented. The authors also note the need for person-centered care that uses community-based assessment of needs to best design and implement care plans, provide individualized monitoring and referrals as needed, and to support caregivers.

Finally, the chapter by Ainslie turns its attention to fundamental questions and challenges of high relevance for researchers interested in understanding the aging process. In addition, the chapter addresses how social context and cultural values operate in the context of Latino aging, a highly complex process affected by a variety of factors that are deeply embedded in, and influenced by, both biological and cultural variables. As way of discussing relevant methods in aging research, Ainslie explains how qualitative methods can be an important tool in helping us understand the differentiated degrees of these aging experiences and processes as well as the gaps that become apparent in conducting quantitative research.

In sum, the chapters in this section examine different aspects of the aging process, in particular, relevant mental health issues in older adults such as depression, anxiety and dementia, among others. In addition, the importance of social context and socioeconomic characteristics throughout the lifespan are explored as determinants in the aging process, including their impact on healthy aging. Access to health services and their adequacy, as well

as the differentiated use of different services by vulnerable older adults in Mexico and among Latino older adults in the United States versus non-Hispanic Whites, is also discussed. In this sense, not only common determinants of use of services such as age, gender and socio-economic characteristics are examined, but also, less explored and equally relevant aspects such as discrimination.

References

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