

The relational system of the elderly after retirement

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Abstract. The paper presents a concise description of the relational system of the elderly after retirement. The main objectives of the paper are: to identify these relationships and how this relational system contributes to the acceptance of retirement; to highlight the specifics of the relationships of the elderly; to inventory the activities of the elderly that influence their relationships. The method used in this study is the interview-based survey and the results are obtained after interviewing twenty people. They are between 65 and 80 years old and some of them live in rural areas and others live in urban areas. The interviewees emphasized the importance of relating, after retirement, with family, friends, and the community. These relationships are based mainly on help: the elderly take care of their grandchildren, they work in the household; also, family, friends, neighbours, the community help them when they are in need (whether they are sick, unable to move or alone). Among the activities facilitating the development and consolidation of the relational system, the following stand out: agricultural work, household activities, caring for grandchildren, involvement in community life. The consolidation and development of the relational system is facilitated and enabled by activities such as: agricultural work, household activities, caring for grandchildren and involvement in the community life.

1 Introduction

Retirement is one of the hardest stage in every man's life. Its perception is different from person to person. This perception is influenced by certain factors such as family, community, the living environment or the activities people undertake during this stage, the factors which can either facilitate or make things harder.

The main concepts addressed in this paper are retirement and the relational system of an elderly person. Retirement is considered an extremely important event in every person's life, it is marking the transition from adulthood to the "third age". It represents a major shift people must adapt to and deal with. There are two aspects captured during the work: the first one refers to the stress and hardships encountered during retirement and the second aspect is related to the freedom that derives from this status.

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For many individuals reaching retirement stage is an extremely pronounced stress factor, it triggers new social roles not easy to accept and adapt to [1]. Suddenly leaving work life after a long time, after many hours a day spent at work, creates multiple accommodation issues, especially for people who have occupied certain important job roles, [2]. Fritz Riemann and Wolfgang Kleespies identified two categories of reactions regarding retirement. These categories are centered on both fear and desire. The fear of retirement has to do with the fear of inability to carry out certain activities. This inability induces a feeling of hopelessness, the senior person associating himself with a "scrap metal". The second reaction mentioned, the one related to desire, refers to the fact that the person begins to think more about himself/herself, thinks about own desires, own needs and hobbies achievable during retirement. The person begins to feel free, being no longer under pressure [3].

The other concept approached in this work refers to human relationships. They represent an important sphere of life for each individual contributing, on multiple levels, to the dynamics of the quality of life; "the human environment due to contact between people is an essential source of individual wellbeing, psychological and moral balance" [4].

2 Data analysis

The paper presents a synthetic description of the relational system of the senior citizen after retirement. Identifying these relationships and how the relational system contributes to the acceptance of retirement, capturing the characteristics of the senior citizens' relationships, highlighting the activities of the elderly that influence their relationships are its main objectives.

The method used in this study is the interview-based survey; the results are obtained from interviewing twenty people between 65 and 80 years of age, both from urban and rural areas.

The data analysis was carried out in compliance with the classical stages of content analysis. In relation to retirement, two attitudes have been very clearly identified: the attitude of the elderly who accept their retirement naturally, without any frustration, continuing their daily activities and keeping their closed relationships with others and the attitude of the elderly whose retirement is marked by loneliness. The latter category are either all alone, without a family, abandoned, ignored, institutionalized or left in the care of strangers.

3 Research results

The results of the research regarding the relational system dimension were grouped into two categories: the group of the elderly who accept retirement and develop a relational system specific to the new roles and the group of the elderly who do not accept or declines retirement having significant difficulties in adapting to the new status of senior citizen and having issues with relating to those who are part of their living environment.

In this paper we will present two aspects of the relational system as described by the elderly interviewed: the interpersonal relationship of the elderly with their family and with their neighbours and friends.

3.1 Interpersonal relationship of the elderly within the family

I have found that elderly people who more readily accept retirement have strong ties and strong relationship with the family and their thoughts are towards family and grandchildren:

"I spend more time with the family since my retirement, I look forward to having grandchildren so that I can enjoy them" (B.65).

The senior citizens who have a close family or maintain a good relationship with their grown children more easily accept their retirement; they hope to strengthen their bond with them and even to provide support to their family looking after their grandchildren.

When it comes to the relationship of the elderly with the family members, the interviews reveal that the people from the rural areas consider more this social network. Most of the rural elderly interviewed kept their children by their side, working together, living in the same household as opposed to the urban elderly interviewees who said they have encouraged their children to try "new horizons, to become independent".

A senior from a rural area said: "My children have not left the parental home they have always been by my side" (M.70). On the contrary, an urban elder, said during his interview "My children don't live with me anymore they have all got their own lives, but we often talk on the phone" (R.78).

However, the acceptance of retirement is not fully related to the residency environment of the elderly, but to the fear of loneliness, the health condition, the level of dependence and the financial background. The individuals who declared that they cannot adapt to retirement status are those who have a difficult or unpleasant relationship with family members. "To beg for a meal or beg them to take me to the doctor... No way. I rather die!" (A.65); "They will dump me to a care home, what a woeful end" (L.65).

Regarding the frequency of meetings with family members, one of the respondents said "Children do ring me up but I am very sorry we live such difficult times and I am unable to help them as a mother anymore – they all work abroad...I am begging our parliament parties to look after the young generation...to give them work ...and make them come back home as some of them aren't coming back... it's very hard...we are old and almost gone." (M.80).

Another respondent confirmed that it is easier to adapt to everything after retirement if "the relationship with the family members is a very good one, I get support from them when I need it." (N.73). Another elder said "we talk with our grandchildren 2-3 hours every day on the phone, especially my husband, he amuses himself the most giggling with the little ones" (P.65).

An important role in the adaptation process is also played by solidarity between family members. The interviewed seniors from rural areas put more emphasis on family unity and cohabitation in the same neighbourhood and even in the same household, but the elderly in urban areas highlighted the geographical distance that separates them from the grown children and grandchildren.

Inventorying the standards and procedures to ensure the functioning of social services for the elderly, three dimensions have been identified, dimensions which configure the image of the elderly benefiting from social services: the roles of the elderly, the rights and obligations of the elderly defining the relational system and the processes used towards gaining social service beneficiary status [5].

Although not all the elderly remained with their children, the bonds between family members remained strong. The children became independent with their own family and most of them leaving their parents. Reluctantly admitting that their children have gone far away the elderly declared being afraid of loneliness while anchoring themselves in hope that their children will have a better life in another country. In some cases, family bonds remain strong over time through communication.

The connection with the extended family is also important in the adaptation process. The relationship with brothers and sisters facilitates the process of adaptation to retirement and specially to ageing. Asked if they had brothers or sisters, most of them answered affirmative, while saying that "If money is needed, we help each other fraternally" (R.78).

"The relationship with my brother is a special one, we are very close, I have been getting along very well since we were children, and we are as close as ever" (M.65).

Another person interviewed stated "My brother can't help me with medication cost because he has a large family too, besides he is the only one working, but in case of an emergency I am sure he would be there for me" (P.65).

Another old man had the same opinion, he said "Yes, I receive support if needed ... they call me, sometimes even at night to check on me and ask if I'm ok. They remind me that they can give me a lift to the hospital whenever needed... because, you see, I don't have children living with me"(M.80). We conclude that the interviewed seniors have defined the relationship with brothers and sisters through help, support, encouragement or concern.

When the elderly were asked about the challenges and conflicts, they mentioned that "Through communication, with calm and respect we have resolved all conflicts" (P.65); "I have always calmly settled family matters" (R.78). But another respondent said "I am a colder person, I like to speak my mind out and sometimes people may think I am less trustful, however I am still being listened to" (P.65).

We find that while some people affirm they do not want to get involved in conflicts at all, others mention that most of the time they get their point of view across and others must consider their opinion. Generally speaking those people who " cannot accept the ageing and the changes that come with it " emphasize the fact that they want to make their points and that sometimes conflicts raise their anger and troubles.

Communication with family members living afar from the interviewed seniors normally take place by phone. Regarding the telephone conversations between family members and elderly people in question, some affirmed "We talk on the phone very often, once or twice a day" (M.65); "My children and grandchildren check on me over the phone because we do not live close to each other" (M.80); "I talk to my brother every day, we keep in touch by phone because he lives far away" (B.65). We find that, through these telephone conversations, family ties can be maintained and they can contribute to the transition process.

The security that older people feel is being generated by the presence of a person they trust the most. When asked about this, they replied "My husband helps me solve problems, he listens to me and advises me" (M.62). We found that older people have more confidence in family members (husband, wife, children). "I tell her everything and she tells me everything ... that's how we've always been ... we've never been cross with each other" (B.65).

Therefore, the elderly want to keep the existing relationships and they want to consult with family members from time to time: "If I have a problem the first person to go to is my wife .. I trust her the most .." (R.78); "If I have a problem, I talk to my wife, she is the most reliable" (O.66). At older ages, people often need more medical assistance, help with their daily activities, hygiene, food, cleaning, moving or taking medication. Sometimes this service is being provided by husband, wife or other close family member or by specialized health care services for the elderly [6], when they are available.

In conclusion relationships are central to a good later life. After retirement the relationships with the family contribute essentially to the adaptation of the elderly to the social reality.

3.2 Interpersonal relationships of elderly with neighbours and friends

Although the need for social protection is acute, elderly relational background is particularly important. "Elderly people represent the largest social group that needs social protection" [7], Regarding the relationship of the elderly with friends and neighbours, we

noticed that the elderly who more easily accepted retirement, have relationships based on mutual help, sincerity and trust. "I have a very respectful relationship with my neighbours, we never argue and we get along very well ... I can't say anything more" (R.78); "I am friendly and I get along with everybody" (L.70).

The elderly interviewees stated that they have relationships based on mutual help with the neighbours: "Yes, the neighbours do help us ... I have no issues with them .. I am lucky to have very good neighbours... we help each other and we are grateful for this"(R.78); "We get along with each other but we help our neighbours more than they help us .. they are people in need .. they are poorer than us" (O.66)

Most of the elderly interviewed in this paper said that they managed to settle all conflicts with their neighbours. Although the elderly still face certain issues in terms of relationships with friends or neighbours, they manage to make their point and tackle any conflicts." They feel safe around a friend or neighbour: "Yes ... I have a friend ... there she is across the street" (S.80)

When it comes to keeping in touch with former colleagues at work, very few maintained these friendship, mainly those aged 65-67, the rest affirmed that "all died .. so have no one to keep in touch with. There are not so many left .. but I do keep in touch with these ones"(S.80). However, the elderly who have kept in touch with colleagues say "We call each other on birthdays or bank holidays" (O.66), "We knew how to keep that friendship along the years and today we still call each other. We've always valued our friendship and we meet whenever possible"(M.65).

The elderly wellbeing is largely generated by the social network through communication, through exchanging experience or "reviving memories". The more active the social network, the lower the number of depressed and anxious elderly people will be. Involvement in religious communities can also be an important source of wellbeing, social integration and social support.

Regarding the desire of the elderly to travel, we note that people in rural areas are not interested in traveling, they prefer to carry out other activities after retirement: "No, we do not go out .. I do knitting sessions with my friend.. sometimes my place, sometimes hers but only in winter as we have work to do in summer"(S.80).

In the urban areas the elderly are more open to travelling comparing to the rural environment: "Yes .. I usually travel a lot with my wife, both in the country and abroad. We go everywhere" (R.80); "I enjoyed travelling when I was young, but not now, I don't like to go anywhere, I don't like to travel by car, I can't stand sitting in the car for long journeys anymore, but I used to go to resorts and spas."(R.69).

The reasons why the elderly prefer not to travel would be the lack of financial resources, the health condition, the desire to spend time around the house with the loved ones (wife, husband): "Yes ... I would travel if I could afford it, I think we would go all over the place"(P.65). "I'm not used to traveling, I prefer to stay around the house" (D.67).

Physical and mental health, the dependence, the financial status, loneliness and isolation are the amongst old age related matters [8]. Neighbours and friends play a very important role in adapting to the new status. Relationships with them can activate and optimize the elderly and can be key elements of their safety net.

4 Conclusions

In conclusion the main highlighted points regarding the interpersonal relationships of the elderly with the family were mainly related to children and grandchildren bond, to the fear of loneliness and to financial matters. Also, communication with family and neighbours and friends has been described as a way to adapt to the new status but also the key to strengthen and maintain these relationships. Solidarity between family members also facilitates

adaptation and defines family unity, helping the elderly accept the changes inherent in age. Security is being ensured by the closest person in their life. This is usually represented by the partners when they exist. The role of grandfather/grandmother is the one that optimizes and motivates the involvement and implication of the elderly.

All the testimonials highlight the elderly basic needs such as personal connections, safety and security, community, purpose, mental stimulation, opportunity to express opinions, thoughts and feelings. These results can be a good starting point in the development of the social network at a local level as well as for establishing and developing suitable community policies.

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