

Postmodern Openings

ISSN: 2068 – 0236 (print), ISSN: 2069 – 9387 (electronic)

Coverd in: Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet,
Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabel, SSRN, Appreciative Inquiry Commons,
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Daniela SOITU
Camelia BÂRSAN

Postmodern Openings, 2012, Volume 3, Issue 3, September, pp: 69-88

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://postmodernopenings.com>

Published by:

Lumen Publishing House

On behalf of:

Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences

Giving and Doing: Identity Perceptions and Images of Elderly Women in the Rural Environment

Daniela ȘOITU¹
Camelia BÂRSAN²

Abstract.

There are few studies concerning the perceptions of elderly individuals living in the Romanian rural environment have regarding their needs, way of life and available resources. We start from the assumption that the status the elderly have in society is not given only by biological and social factors, but also by subjective factors, by the way they perceive themselves, the way they perceive their own life, family, community. The study is based on four interviews with elderly women living in the rural environment. The paradigm is constructivist. The data was collected through a semi-structured interview, being then analysed and interpreted through a thematic contents analysis. The results highlight the diverse adaptation strategies used by individuals living in the rural environment, depending on their level of education and on their previous line of work: farmer/smallholder and intellectual/teacher. The theories of activity and continuity can be found in the perceptions of elderly farmers. Elderly intellectuals have also gone through a stage of social disengagement. The results underline the fact that each of the elderly individuals interviewed has developed adaptive strategies in accordance to their identity-related image and to their previous career. The research is exploratory, qualitative, and its results could be starting points for studying and capitalising on the resources these individuals have, as well as for developing policies and actions concerning this life stage.

Keywords:

adaptive strategies upon retirement, elderly intellectuals, elderly farmers, elderly women, rural environment, identity-related image

¹ Postdoctoral Researcher, Centre of Ethics and Health Policies, “G.T.Popa” University, Iași / Assoc. Prof. Ph.D., Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social – Political Sciences, A.I.Cuza University, Iași, Carol I 11, 70056, Iași, Romania, danielag@uaic.ro; tel.: (+) 0722837241.

² Student, Mastert Program: Family and management of familie’s ressources, Faculty of Philosophy and Social – Political Sciences, A.I.Cuza University, Iași.

1. Demographic ageing. Theories and trends

Throughout the world, it is expected that the number of elderly people to become greater than the number of children for the first time in 2045. This population trend is the result of several factors, the main ones remaining the decrease in fertility, in birth rates over several generations, as well as “the shift of mortality towards older ages.”

The European Parliament Resolution called "*Green Paper: Towards adequate, sustainable and safe European pension systems*", adopted in Strasbourg on the 16 February 2011 takes into account the population trends across the European Union and the need to guarantee that pensions will be paid. In order to achieve this, according to the Resolution, it is necessary that more individuals participate in the employment market and do this for longer. By adopting the Resolution, the European Parliament requests from member states the implementation of measures that would allow to engage socially the members of society throughout their lives and to attract the elderly towards activities. The same document also underlines, amongst others, that an older workforce and individuals with a longer professional life can bring a positive contribution to the economic recovery and to future growth. It is considered necessary to have an active policy for preventing age-related discrimination, through the promotion of a *European culture of active ageing*, that would ensure for the elderly a life filled with vitality and dignity.

Changes in the recognition of work, production and action capability of the elderly, in the promotion of the potential this population category has can be effected both at personal and attitude level, as well as at the level of policies and practices in the areas of social security and public policies.

Literature positions this life stage between two extremes: the pessimistic one, that of a sad destiny, and the optimistic one, in which the individuals manage to age nicely, serenely accepting their age and the problems that accompany it, by engaging in new activities. Caradec (2001) explains this positioning through three phenomena: difference in lifestyle, which has evolved greatly in recent years; physical disabilities, present in some, absent in others; ageing may be viewed thus as serenity or as pathology.

The process of ageing is marked by the daily interactions of the aged persons, by the behaviours of those surrounding them, contributing to the construction of the Aged individuals' identity.

Ageing imposes the exercise of fresh social roles, and the extent to which each individual adapts to the ageing process will influence the acceptance of role changes that are typical for the third age. Ageing means the loss of professional roles – after retirement – and of family roles – after the offspring's departure from home or after the partner's demise. Thus, roles such as mother/father, husband/wife lose some of their contents. These aspects, specific to functionalist sociology, can be found in the *theories of activity* (Havighurst and Albrecht, 1953) and in the *theory of disengagement* (Cumming and Henry, 1961). Dealing with the concept of "successful" ageing, the two authors assert that it is associated with the voluntary attitude in maintaining a high level of engagement. However, the activity theory, Covey believes (1981, as quoted by Hooyman and Kiyak, 2008, p. 310), does not manage to take into account the fact that personality, socio-economic status and lifestyle variables may be more important than the maturational ones in the associations found between activity and life satisfaction, health and well-being (*ibidem*).

Sociological research has tried to bring to light the types of activity that may bring life satisfaction in the third age. The results have confirmed that informal activities (with relatives, friends, family), as well as solitary ones, in the household, may bring more satisfaction than formal ones (Șoitu-Gîrleanu, 2006).

The theory of continuity asserts that each individual, irrespective of age, has a personality and a life style that is different from others, that personality plays a major role in the adaptation to the ageing process. Personality traits and the axiological system become more marked as the individual ages, or remain almost the same throughout life, with some changes; people age successfully, keeping their favourite roles by adapting their techniques, or, in other words, by substituting lost roles with similar ones, continuing to maintain typical ways of adapting to the environment (Hooyman, Kiyak, 2008).

Some functionalist sociologists consider that this life stage is a stage of *social disengagement*. The supporters of the disengagement theory are the authors of the volume "Growing Old", Elaine Cumming and William Henry (1961). In this book, the authors have proposed a theory of the third age which contradicts the idea according to which, in order to be integrated, aged persons must be active. The two sociologists have studied the way in which the elderly distance themselves from the roles they have at work and prepare for the final detachment – death.

Cumming and Henry have suggested that the withdrawal of the elderly from the roles held before retirement is inevitable, being a natural process, asserting at the same time that the process of disengagement is a universal process in the individual's retreat from society.

Disengagement is considered useful and functional not only for the individual, but also to society, as the employment market is thus freed of a low-productivity population, power is thus passed on to the older to the younger generations, making thus possible a generational renewal in the field of work. The theory of disengagement has been criticised numerous times, the criticisms highlighting the fact that withdrawal cannot be inevitable, irreversible, functional and universal. A elderly individuals may be *socially withdrawn*, but *mentally, intellectually active*, reading, acquiring information, or else intensifying their roles as grandparents, becoming more involved in their grandchildren's rearing and education. For instance, individuals in the rural environment continue to work well after they're 70 and even 75.

The theory of symbolic interactionism underlines the fact that at the foundation of the relationship system sits the way the other is perceived and the other's significance within this interaction. Symbolic interactionism highlights the *relation* between *the individual* and *the environment*, the encounter between the two factors significantly influencing the process of ageing. Whenever elderly individuals are faced with change, the way they manage to select from the environment what they need contributes to maintaining a positive attitude concerning one's self; however, changes bring results that are mistakenly attributed to the changes caused by ageing (Rădulescu, 1994).

Perceptions do not occur in a vacuum, but instead as a result of interaction with others, and low self-esteem and dissatisfaction may be the result of the interpretations given by others to the behaviour of the elderly. Any change in status may have an objective reality and a subjective one, and in symbolic interactionism the objective or the subjective dimension are the ones dictating the parameters according to which the lives of individuals are moulded. Besides, throughout its evolution the human being assumes a series of roles that may or may not be meeting the expectations of the other members of society.

Culture has an important role in the way ageing is experienced, as it influences perceptions concerning the third age, the attitudes concerning the roles, rights and responsibilities the elderly have, as well as the systems of support and care that are available for them. Allport

believes that the society loses very much when it is not using the assets of the elderly individuals (Allport, 1981, p. 309).

The potential of elderly people could be used through volunteer activities. Involvement in volunteer activities, appreciating what it means to be active, to interact, to partake, to be in charge, may be rewarding.

Human relations have a priority role in the life of any individual, creating an environment in which contacts between people are an essential source of personal well-being, of emotional and social balance. Family support, social support and social integration are associated with the well-being of the elderly individual's life

A balanced family, where filial relations are functional and follow mutual support patterns, can have major beneficial contributions during the ageing phenomenon, whereas extreme social isolation can contribute to the rise in mortality rate (La Viest, as quoted by Stanciu, 2008). The most auspicious environment for the elderly remains the family, community (neighbours, friends, acquaintances, community people), a friendly environment, filled with familiar individuals.

The transition between the second stage of life, from adulthood to the third age, is marked by retirement. For some people this can be a stress factor, as they regret the passage of time, having the feeling that they have very little time left, and this result in a simplification of life plans which, as some authors assert, from a certain point of view, is even a sign of wisdom (Margineanu, 1973). Thus, they will have dreams, wishes, aspirations, expectations that correspond to their current circumstances, thus avoiding unnecessary emotional turmoil and disappointments and ensuring more serenity in the realisation of their projects.

2. Methodology

The aim of the research was to investigate the perceptions of elderly female individuals in the rural environment concerning their ageing. We have looked for perceptions such individuals have about themselves, about families, neighbourhoods and communities, about the way they have adapted to the retirement stage.

The research questions we have sought an answer to have thus been directed towards: perceptions / (self)reflections concerning (self)ageing among women in the rural environment. What are these perceptions and what are their particularities? What influences them?

What is the identity-related image of the elderly woman living in a rural environment? What is the relationship between the identity-related image and the subject's level of education or previous occupation?

Our perspective was a constructionist one. As Parker underlines (2005, chapter 6), in psychology, constructivism is concerned with the different cognitive and perceptual ways of seeing reality, trying to discover the mental processes that underpin the construction of things by individuals. Constructionism is close to the way "constructivism" is used outside psychology, as it aims to show the way the person itself is also constructed.

We have looked at identity as a concept in which *the personal, social, institutions dimensions are closely inter-connected*, referring to the psychological particularities of each individual, as well as to their roles in society and institutions. From an ethno-methodological perspective, *identity* is the result of interactions, negotiated and acquired during habitual events. It is a constitutive trait of the social encounters between the members of society (Paoletti, 1998).

The identity process becomes essential for social interactions, especially in situations where the discourse is oriented towards the participants' specific identities. The identification action concerns both the emitters – the ones planning what they transmit – and the receivers.

In order to collect data we have opted for a semi-structured interview, with an interview guide focussing on a few topics: the identity image of the elderly person, the relationship with the family and the close social environment, perceptions concerning the status as an elderly person, their preparation and adaptation to this life stage.

As a scientific investigation procedure using the process of verbal communication in order to collect information concerning the pursued goal (Muccheli, apud. Miftode, 2006, p. 157), the interview has facilitated the collection of data from the interviewed individuals, as they showed their wish and availability to talk as much as possible around the announced topics.

In order to analyse and interpret data, we have opted for the thematic contents analysis, this being a method that aims to highlight topics, trends, attitudes, values and patterns of associations between themes and values; this method is used as a rule with documents that contain complex information, which have a high communicational value (Iluț, 1997).

The selection criteria applied to the participants were: individuals over the age of 60, of female gender, living in a rural environment, in a couple relationship. We have decided it would be useful to look for perceptions and particularities of the identity-related image of elderly women living in a rural environment, depending on the level of previous formal education (school/university) and on the occupation had during their active life. Four interviews were held: two with women who used to be farmers (smallholders) and two with women who had had intellectual occupations (teachers). The residence environment of the interviewed subjects is a rural place in Northern Moldavia. The interviews were preceded by a 20-30 minute meeting with each of the subjects, in their homes, during which the aim of the research, the research question and the themes were outlined. The study started in May 2010, the data being collected and interpreted in the first half of 2011. The four individuals have agreed verbally to take part in the study and to be recorded on audio devices. The interviews also took place in the homes of the subjects, each lasting between 100 and 120 minutes. The recorded dialogues were then transcribed and analysed by theme. The classification of answers through a thematic contents analysis was carried out depending on the level of formal education and on the pre-retirement occupation. In presenting the results and interpretations, we'll introduce Elena (72 years old, farmer/smallholder), Natalia (60 years old, former teacher), Maria (63 years old, former teacher) and Ioana (69 years old, farmer/smallholder).

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Relationship with the self: the identity-related image

The significant differences occur in the regrets elderly people have. Whereas the mental experiences of the interviewed elderly intellectuals do not show regrets – "I do not have regrets. I've acted in such a way, so that I would have nothing to blame myself for" (Natalia), "I've lived the way I wanted, I've achieved what I wanted. I don't regret anything." (Maria) – in the category of farmers we found some regrets concerning their education "I would have liked to study more; hard times. I used to go to school in secret, and my father forbade me to go; there was a lot of work to do [at home]" (Elena); "I used to be good in school, top of my class. I went to school for seven years, I wanted to try to go to a high-school, but my father wouldn't hear of it." (Ioana).

According to Maslow's theory (2009), and as this analysis points out, people are motivated by the same universal needs, it is just the way they are fulfilled that is different. As a need is fulfilled in a satisfactory manner, another will come to motivate behaviour. The basic needs of the elderly farmers have been fulfilled, but their higher needs have remained untouched. Within this category one can find substantially lowered self-esteem, not due to ageing but instead to the failures of the past reflected in the present. Everything is lived by these individuals with resignation. The elderly farmers do not claim back anything; however, what had been latent has become manifest due to the current need for self-actualisation. They feel the need to have recognition and respect from the part of the society; they feel they are ignored by the political decision maker: "We've always come last. We used to be the foundation of the country, and now we're below that level, we're pointed at in shame." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer); "We've never begged and we don't do it now, we don't want handouts, but our work has never amounted to anything. Now we're in the same class with the slothful and the drunk, and our work feeds others (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

The society's hostile attitude is also felt by the former teachers we have talked to: "We've had enough of the insults we've taken from our politicians, they've probably forgotten that we've been active so many years and contributed to the smooth running of society. I've learned to tolerate these people's ignorance." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "The more society wants me to go away, the more I try my darndest to live." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual). We identify here coping strategies, in the sense of accepting the things that can no longer be changed, as well as confidence in success, irrespective of social trends.

Our analysis has shown differences also in the issues that give the elderly a sense of fulfilment. For Ioana and Elena, former farmers, the feeling of fulfilment is given, to the greatest extent, by their offspring and their successes, as they try to substitute their own professional failures with the successes of their offspring: "I'm glad about the results my children have achieved, there is nothing more I could have wished for. I've built a house and I've done my duty as a mother, as a citizen." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer); "I've worked hard, I wanted a better future for my child; he's managed to do whatever I couldn't do and even dreamed of doing." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer). For the former teachers Natalia and Maria, the feeling of fulfilment is balanced by their professional achievements: "To have guided generations of pupils, to

have seen their results, everything I managed to do in my profession, everything I managed to do as a human being, my children's achievements." (Maria); "I am categorically a fulfilled person. I have lived effectively and affectively, and I was not just the teacher standing in front of the children, I've tried to get into their world, into their hearts, and give them knowledge. I've saved many of them and I'm glad to see their achievements. My family makes me whole, my children and their achievements." (Natalia).

The elderly are at ease with their own image, they are confident in their potential and in their own powers. Nothing is experienced in a tragic manner, nothing is dramatised. The elderly women we have interviewed have preserved their dignity, they do not allow themselves to be overcome by the society's hostile attitude. The freedom to act, their independence, their offspring's successes, their personal achievements and everything they do or surrounds them gives them value and define their lives. These people keep a positive attitude and state of mind and have an especially well-developed sense of humour. On the other hand, they do not find easily their place in the community, especially in actions organised at community level: the elderly farmers we have interviewed prefer the quiet life around the house and their involvement in household chores, making certain they are well done. This activity gives them meaning, they are expert at such activities, this is the activity they continue.

3.2. Negotiating identity in the relationship with the others: family, neighbours, the community

Concerning this dimension, we wanted to find out more about the way the elderly women we interviewed related to their families, neighbours and community. At any moment in life, needs may emerge, and the resources for meeting such needs cannot be found solely in the individual's own powers, but also in one's family, neighbourhood or community.

All the elderly individual we have talked to assert that the relationship with the family exists and is manifested in various forms: communication, affection, mutual support. The relations with the others, be they family members, neighbours, people in the community, give meaning to the life of the elderly.

These individuals describe their relationship with the family in *positive terms*, affection being a central factor in their support. It is not just faith and the inner strength of each of these people that supports them in overcoming life's problems, but also their families: "We are very united, it couldn't be any other way. If you don't get along with your family, who are you supposed to get along with, then?!" (Elena, 72 years old, farmer); "Cooperation, respect, open communication; affectivity is very important." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "Understanding, support, a lot of harmony." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual); "Without my family's help I wouldn't have succeeded in life, they've been there for me all the time." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

Family is a trusted ally in all the significant moments the elderly go through. The meanings of this go beyond blood ties. Elena said about her neighbours that together "they are like family, we get along well".

The relationship with the neighbours are functional, but they are conditioned by the way the latter are perceived: as "good" or "bad": "If you have good neighbours, you find ways to get along." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer). However, irrespective of the neighbours' characteristics, they are accepted, tolerated by the others, as long as they don't breach certain norms: "The neighbours who live down the road drink a bit too much, but I have nothing against them, as long as they keep to their business. They don't insult me, they do not cause any other kind of trouble, they respect me; drinking is a hard habit to kick, but for the rest, I don't have bad neighbours." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

The importance of these relations, the way they operate, are also expressed, depending on the needs of each elderly person, in the particularities of their neighbours. All the subjects have said they ask for their neighbours' help in situations that require immediate action: "We help each other; neighbours are closer than family; you never know when you may need help; there are always unforeseen events." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "A neighbour is closer than a relative, they are there for you both in times of trouble and in times of joy." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

The neighbours are trustworthy partners for the elderly people we have talked to, and this partnership is conditioned by mutuality, trust and respect.

On the other hand, the relationship between the elderly and the community is deficient. We have found acceptance and a formal respect, but without engagement, without eagerness from the part of the

community or towards the community. The citizen duty is mentioned by Ioana, but only in relation to social cohabitation norms.

The relationship with the representatives of the local authorities are described by the former teachers as being "within normal limits, but they could be better, if only there were better communication. People's suggestions are not taken into account " (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual) or: "Acceptable, but there is room for improvement." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual). The farmers oscillate between social conformism: "I cannot say they are good or bad, we respect each other." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer) and obedience added to respect for authority: "They are the leaders of the community and we must respect each other." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

Our analysis has shown differences in the desire to become involved in the life of the community. Unlike the farmers, the intellectuals show a tendency towards dynamism, towards an involvement in the life of the community, towards showing initiative. The former teachers miss the existence of opportunities, the others' eagerness to embrace new ideas and the support of the local authorities: "We could establish an association, to have activities that would benefit everyone; a meeting point, a place of socialisation for those who are no longer young." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual) or: "I'd like to work as a volunteer; I want to help people to live healthily, to change their mentality; a health education programme and even more than that; my personal and professional experience would allow me to do that, I only need a little support." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual). These people wish to be useful, active and acknowledged in the community for their contribution.

The ladies who have worked predominantly in agriculture do not reject the idea of getting involved in the life of the community, but only if such involvement is asked of them; they maintain an obedient attitude, however declaring their availability to respond behaviourally in the case of a request: "If my help is required and I can actually help, I won't stand aside, because the way I am at my age, thank God! I still have my strength." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer); they hold on to the popular teaching about "knowing one's place". On the other hand, these are practices that have continued since their active stage, when neither the political system, nor the community practice required initiative, but rather obedience and execution of commands. Despite these experiences, the solidarity spirit is preserved: "We must stay united if we

want things to work, we must care about those living next to us." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

For the former teachers, the strategy of successful ageing is marked by competitiveness, whereas the strategy of the farmers we have interviewed includes elements of compromise and cooperation – the work philosophy within the teams formed in the former State Farming Cooperatives is still visible today: "we must be united if we want things to work", in other words, "let us help each other finish working our allotted patch of land".

The level of professional responsibility present in the active stage is still manifest nowadays: the teachers wish to continue educating the others – to have influence "over" others –, whereas the women who used to work the land still want results obtained "together" with others.

The lives of the elderly individuals we have interviewed and the relationships they become involved in are articulated around the family and the neighbourhood, these being the elements that bring satisfaction in the lives of the elderly, irrespective of their previous occupation: "They help me understand them and myself better." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "They give me strength and hope." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer); "They help me live, to communicate" (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual); "It would be a desert around me; people cannot live on their own." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

3.3. Preparation for this life stage

The elderly individuals we have spoken to did not view retirement as a dramatic change. They did not view retirement and the period that comes after it as a stage that requires special preparation, an insurance form a financial point of view. The intellectuals were sceptical in relation to private insurance, and the farmers had insufficient data concerning this system.

For the farmers, retirement meant an opportunity to continue their habitual activity and to have a small and relatively secure income: "I was glad I could get retired and still be able to work." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer); "It did not seem that important to me; I was expecting that small sum of money, but I was not relying on it; work is still the main basis." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

As far as the interviewed intellectuals, retirement meant the decrease of the feeling of professional responsibility, and the increase of the feeling of freedom, or relaxation: "Like a long holiday" (Natalia, 60

years old, intellectual); "A calmer life" (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual), initially a period of disengagement.

The mental preparation for this life stage took place through self-education and acceptance: "I was thinking this moment will come, but without allowing myself to feel overwhelmed" (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual) or by viewing it as a pleasant challenge thrown by destiny: "I wasn't even thinking I'd get so far." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer). The elderly believed there wasn't anything more they could have done in order to prepare for this stage, feeling the situation was out of their hands and without having the capacity of controlling either the authoritarian communist system or a system in permanent transition (after 1990). The actions of these people were determined by the social and historical living circumstances.

3.4. Coping strategies used by the elderly

This life stage brings a number of changes, which require adaptation from the elderly individual. Regarding this dimension, we have tried to find out the ways the elderly we had interviewed coped with their problems, what activities they carry out and the motivation behind carrying them out, the way they have reorganised their time.

Contrary to the ideas according to which together with retirement and with ageing there is an onset of anxiety, of a feeling of uselessness, of a sensation that one's social prestige has collapsed, the elderly included in this research did not experience such feelings.

For the former teachers, the exit from professional life meant *experiencing a freedom* that was not allowed at the time when they were shackled by a schedule, as well as the opportunity *to give proper attention to their families*. Our study points out the fact that the elderly did not view this moment as an ending, but rather as a new beginning, the time to dedicate themselves to that part of life they had ignored for justified reasons: "I don't have a feeling of uselessness; I have the freedom to be free." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "I told myself that nothing and no-one is irreplaceable, that life follows its natural cycle, and I can't and won't oppose it; I didn't make it into a tragedy." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual).

The elderly intellectuals make decisions that confirm the theory of social exchanges, by accepting a transfer of activity towards other generations: "I could have stayed on at school, but I believed it would be fair of me to make room for the younger generation; I have children

myself and I haven't forgotten what it was like to be young. I wanted a rest, forty years of work are enough for me." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual); or: "You must give the young room to grow; I've had requests to stay on; I've made my decision and I stick to it." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual).

As for the elderly *farmers* we have talked to, they *did not experience the feeling they were leaving their activity*, on the contrary, they felt they were continuing it. The retirement feeling was nevertheless present, as they left behind a schedule and a team; they miss meeting with the others and the organised activities outside the home. These changes, however, did not occur in their lives once they reached a certain age, but instead they happened together with a "forced retirement", caused by the state decision to abolish the state farming cooperatives. Interestingly, the challenges of adapting to the new life stage were the same as those a person working in any institution may encounter: "For a while I used to wake up around 4 to get ready to go to work, so that by 6.30 everything was set up around the house; and then I'd realise I had nowhere to go and I could set up my own schedule." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer). Although their life continued in the same community, for those who used to work in farming retirement from professional life was felt fully; the atmosphere "at work", the feeling of belonging to a group suffered: "I was used to being with the women in my team; for a long time I missed them and those days." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer).

The elderly individuals we have interviewed become involved in informal activities (with their immediate families, neighbours, friends, relatives) as well as in solitary ones, in the household. The elderly farmers, for the most time, invest their physical and mental strength in household activities: "I have no free time throughout the day, I work in the garden, I tend to the land, to the animals around the house; *if you have your strength, there's no time for boredom*; I sometimes do embroidery and very seldom I watch TV, and then mostly news; I do read, but mostly on Sundays." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer); "When I have nothing to do I don't feel well; now that spring is here, there's no time for sitting around. I tend to the garden and to the animals; I watch TV sometimes, but only in the evenings; there's sowing to be done, and the house needs to be put in order." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer).

The elderly *intellectuals* divide their time between *household activities* and *cultural, educational activities*: "I do whatever catches my fancy, I read, I get information about research in my domain of activity, I make

comparisons with what has already been discovered; I navigate on the Internet frequently; other times I do housework." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "I read a lot, especially healthy living magazines; I sometimes help my neighbours' children with their homework, I do various kinds of housework. I like to work, to be active. *Work brings me personal satisfaction.*" (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual).

Bearing in mind the current social circumstances, these people express themselves through a positive and acquiescent state when they talk about this life stage. At the end of things, being active or disengaged depends on the meanings assigned by each individual, on his/her options and abilities, as well as on the way the community supports their continued involvement in its life.

3.5. Satisfactions and dissatisfactions the elderly have in the relationship with their families

Concerning this last dimension we wanted to find out the elderly individuals' perspective on family and whether there are differences depending on their previous occupation.

Our analysis has shown that, irrespective of the particularities of the interviewed individuals, *the family* was the most secure social and affective support, even though the *responsibility* for one's own life and care belongs entirely to the individuals we have interviewed: "Family is the encouragement, they've been there for me in the most difficult moments." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "My husband, children, relatives are my pillar of strength; I'm enjoying affection and a lot of understanding" (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual); "In my heart I need to know I have my family close to me." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer); "You're a stranger in this world if you have no family; I love to see them gather around the home, there's nothing else I love more." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer). When they do not visit each other, the connection is maintained through other means – telephone or internet in the case of the elderly intellectuals: "I see and I talk to my daughter every day on the internet; I keep in touch with the others by telephone, and my son comes home every week." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "We talk on the phone at least once a week." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

Distance in space, a considerable one in some cases, between the elderly parents and their offspring prevents frequent contacts. Even though from an affective point of view they are very close to each other,

the low number of visits is a source of *dissatisfaction* for the elderly individual we have talked to: "I'm sorry I can't see them more often; all my children live very far; when I really miss them, I go visit them." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual); "I have children in Timișoara and abroad; I see those in Romania more often, but I see the others once a year; I can't go visit them too often, maybe once a year for those in the country, I got to visit the others [abroad] because they took me there." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer);

Another *dissatisfaction* comes from *the impossibility of becoming involved in rearing and educating grandchildren*: "I would have liked them to be closer, so that I could get involved in rearing and educating my granddaughter; they won't let her stay with us." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual); "I can only do this occasionally, when they visit in the summer; I try to leave my mark in my granddaughter's education, as much as time and distance allow me to." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual);

The elderly intellectuals would like to become involved in their grandchildren's education, but *they think about the safety of the latter*, mentioning an aspect that is not negligible – *the lack of medical services in the rural environment and the great distance to the city*: "It's better if they're with their parents; if they become ill, what do I do until the ambulance arrives?! I'd rather die before I let anything happen to them." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer). These individuals *do not have the possibility of investing in the role of grandparent*, as this is a role that was in a way assigned to them by the birth of their grandchildren, and less by their effective involvement in their rearing and education.

The analysis has shown that there are no significant differences concerning the perspective the elderly have on family. The economic and social situation of the Romanian rural environment, lacking any perspectives and opportunities for personal growth, contributes to a lack of significant differences: "What could they have done here?! For years we've tried to invest in agriculture, my husband even bought a tractor; people don't have money; if you work their land, they never pay you on time, because they have no money, and sometimes they don't pay you at all. I think we'll sell the tractors; sometimes you only have losses." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual).

The fact that these individuals *are not single* contributes to the inner equilibrium. The relationship with their life partners is characterised by harmony, understanding and respect, and even though

there are differences of opinion, these women find in their life partners a trustworthy ally: "My life partner is a real support; we communicate very well and he helps me a lot." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual); "My husband jokes all the time; he helps me everywhere, both in the kitchen and around the house; I can rely on him." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual).

Here are the responses of elderly *farmers*: "I'm lucky he's a good man and does not drink; we've always worked as a team, pulling at the same yoke." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer); "We've had almost 50 years of marriage, we used to bicker when we were young; he's become a little fussy of late, but we get along well." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer).

Our analysis has found differences in the way the elderly are involved or become involved in their offspring's decision-making.

The involvement of elderly *intellectuals* in the process of making important decisions for their offspring consists in consultation between the latter and the parents: "I give my children guiding suggestions; we are consulted every time they make an important decision, such as moving to Canada, but the decision itself belongs to them, as it is natural." (Natalia, 60 years old, intellectual).

Here is another response: "My daughters call me sometimes to ask for my opinion; we get involved if our children request it, but we won't insist; it's up to them to decide what they want and what they have to do; they need to have this freedom." (Maria, 63 years old, intellectual).

The elderly *farmers* are *informed, rather than consulted*, about the decisions made, although they enjoy *great respect* and *a lot of affection*: "My son is almost 50, he's a grown man; we're always there for him in thought and to tell him a kind word." (Elena, 72 years old, farmer); "They are mature people, they've left home years ago; we talk on the phone, they tell me what they've been up to, what the grandchildren are up to, but I can't say they ask for my advice; I, as a mother, am morally there for them, but they know better than we do what they need to do." (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer).

The elderly individuals we have talked to respect their offspring's freedom of choice, sometimes do to the age of the offspring, other times due to the trust the parents have in their offspring's decisions: "They know better [than we do] what they need to do " (Ioana, 69 years old, farmer), or to trust created by the offspring's past decisions, which in time proved beneficial, or by the offspring's elevated level of education.

Elderly *intellectuals* give their offspring the needed freedom of choice, and the fact that they are consulted by their children in certain situations could be due to the much more equal level of education, as well as by the much younger age of the offspring.

As a result of the analysis, concerning this dimension we have seen that the biggest *dissatisfactions* remain those related to the physical distance between parents and children. The elderly individuals we have interviewed wish they could see their children and grandchildren more often, that they could spend more time together, in order to allow them *to become involved in the rearing and education of their grandchildren*. On the other hand, they are *happy* and *proud* of their offspring's achievements. The fact that the latter have a satisfactory living standard, much higher than their parents', causes the parents to accept the situations without much regret.

Communication, affection, understanding, mutual support are sources of satisfaction in the relationship with the family. All these and the children's well-being give them the necessary mental comfort, so that they can successfully overcome any stressful or unforeseen situation, and this result in *a high degree of satisfaction*.

Conclusions

The lives of the people we have interviewed are a continuum experienced between giving and doing. Our study, without being representative, highlights the differentiated process of ageing, confirming the premise of individualised ageing and bringing a new element for the elderly women living in the rural environment: the fact that their adaptation to retirement is influenced by their previous occupation. Their health status, their degree of education, their life experience, their professional experience are criteria supporting the lack of homogeneity in the identity-related image and in the coping strategies, specially in this first stage of old age. Our study highlights the importance the level of education and the previous occupation have for the identity image of the elderly individual and in the development of coping strategies.

Significant differences occur also in their desire to become involved in the social life of the community. Elderly intellectuals insist on their right to put their skills to use. It is necessary to underline a few issues concerning involvement, the activation of "lost resources", the assumed or imposed status of powerlessness, overcome through strategies at local level and through carefully developed social policies at national level.

The elderly in the rural environment continue to be active. For the elderly intellectuals there is, however, a balance between cultural, educational and household activities, whereas in the case of elderly farmers, household activities are more predominant. Both categories behave as good neighbours.

The degree of life satisfaction of the interviewed elderly individuals is in close connection to the family, to the achievements of their own offspring, with their way of life. Differences have been identified also in relation to this dimension: whereas life satisfaction in the case of elderly intellectuals is also given by the professional activity, in the case of elderly farmers we found a certain degree of dissatisfaction concerning this dimension.

The highlights in the differentiated ageing process and the significant rate of population ageing suggest the need for concrete efforts aimed at a fair and broad approach of integration policies, in order to include ageing in economic and social development strategies, by developing strategies for training early in life for all life stages.

Acknowledgment

This article was co-financed from the European Social Fund by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013, within the project “Post-doctoral Studies in the Field of Healthcare Ethics’ Policies” implemented by the University of Medicine and Pharmacy “G.T.Popa” Iași, the number of the identification of the contract is POSDRU/89/1.5/S/61879. This material does not necessary represent the opinion of the European Union or of the Romanian Government.

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