

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING AT THE THIRD AGE. A GOOD PRACTICE MODEL: THE "SENIORS ACADEMY", BRAŞOV

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Abstract: *In this article I will present the project „Seniors Academy”, a project for the elderly implemented within the Day Center for the elderly, within the Brasov Social Services Institution. Although there are preconceptions and even theories that talk about the inactivity of the elderly, this project comes to contradict these ideas and to show that the elderly can be active people, with the desire to learn so as to remain part of society. The "Seniors Academy" is a project that confirms the theory of activity, linked to the concept of "successful aging". The project proposes a new vision of the retirement period, with interactive learning and personal development activities.*

Key words: *elderly people, activity theory, personal development at third age.*

1. Introduction

The perception of aging suggests that old age is characterized by an involution. Although we consider that elderly can no longer learn new things, as it is confirmed by some psychological researches, by introducing the concept of "crystalline intelligence" (Cattell, 1987). On the other hand, some sociological theories, such as activity theory and continuity theory, insist on the concept of activity during retirement, so that the elderly can occupy their leisure time and, at the same time, feel integrated and useful in society.

In this regard, I shall present a good practice model that was implemented in Brasov, the "Seniors Academy" project, which had diverse learning and personal development courses adapted to the needs and interests of the elderly, a project in which the Faculty of Sociology and Communication was partner. The project was implemented within the Day Care Center for the elderly, within the Brasov Social Services Institution. The project responds to the demands of the elderly people, to have diverse activities within the center and also to the elderly people's desire for social integration, according to the

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evolution of the society. Although the activities at the center were quite diverse, from excursions to social activities, the elderly wanted more. In all their activities, they used their abilities and skills learned throughout their lives. Or they wanted to learn something new, to participate in development courses that would broaden their horizons and adapt more easily to the norms of today's society.

Below I will describe some theories that come to confirm the need for learning at any age, even at the third age.

2. Theoretical Framework

The statistics on the percentage of people over the age of 60 show that the number of elderly people will exceed the current 21%, reaching 33% in 2030, while the proportion of young people under 15 will decrease from 23 % to 19% (<http://www.mmuncii.ro/pub/imagemanager/images/file/Legislatie/HOTARARI-DE-GUVERN/HG541-2005.pdf>). This means a new reconfiguration of what life means after 60-65 years. Different European states have already taken steps in retirement age, increasing this age to 67 years (<https://www.europalibera.org/a/28153131.html>).

Also, the increase in life expectancy confronts us with an unusual situation: elderly people will have to live on average for 20 years in retirement without any other paid work. Or, the fact that work is the source of people's identity during the active period, can bring some questions about the retirement period: What will retirees do in their free time? How will they take their leisure time? What will be the activities of the elderly, so that they remain occupied, and the feeling of inutility is not induced to them? Various theories of aging also mention involution and the "success of aging".

The best known are those in the functional paradigm that introduce the concepts of regress (disengagement theory), but also the continuation of activities (continuity theory) and the finding of new activities (activity theory). Functional paradigm argues that aging is characterized by loss of roles: professional at retirement; family life with the departure of children and / or the death of the life partner; social, with the loss of extra-family entourage by ceasing activity or the death of persons with important roles in one's life and with whom the elderly constantly interact (Marina, 2003).

Theories that sustain the activity and continuity of activities in the pre-retirement period seem to be the ones that are gaining more and more land in the current society.

The theory of activity, in contradiction with the theory of disengagement that talks about involution and regress, comes with hopeful prospects for the elderly. The theory argues that older people can remain active as long as they manage their age optimally. This means maintaining the middle age activities for as long as possible, and then finding "substitutes" for them: work, friends, even life partner when he/she does not exist. Success of aging means active aging, productive roles involving the inclusion of elderly people in different organizations, volunteering or participation in activities in different social groups.

Different studies (Drew, 1997; Havighurst and Albrecht, 1961, Diggs, 2008; Palmore, 1975, apud Quadagno, 1999, Lemon, Bengston, Peterson, 1972) show that hobbies and volunteering at the third age can be solutions to achieve "successful aging". Also, a

wider social network, maintaining relationships with family and friends are solutions to the success of an optimal aging. Gotea (2014) upholds the idea that social networks evolve over time, reflecting the processes and evolving during socialization, de-socialization, and resocialization processes.

Another idea that comes to sustain the theory of activity is that of the competitive sport for the third age. Eman (2012) points out that both, the theory of disengagement and the theory of activity actually speak of decline. If the theory of disengagement is explicit, by the notions it promotes, the theory of activity suggests that if you do not want to become a dependent elderly person, you should as far as possible do something at the third age, preferably to have productive activities. Eman (2012) introduced the notion of competitive sport (not for health promotion), considering that competitive elderly athletes can overcome age-related prejudices.

Interestingly, there is another aspect mentioned by the author. Older people often try to separate themselves from the old age, especially with regard to social interaction. The term "the mask of third age" describes the separation of the exterior, even if the persons in question look their age, through the special markers - white hair, wrinkles - they try to adopt and maintain thoughts and behaviour relatively close to the younger one.

On the other hand, depending on the context, people can themselves fall into the category of elderly people, although they are not elderly, chronologically. Thus, competitive sport appears as a saviour, breaking the myths of aging and those who practice such sports, gain confidence, competence, responsibility, joy.

There is another perspective of the theory of activity, which once again confirms the necessity of activities at the third age, so that the success of aging can be talked about.

This new approach to aging, linked to age capability, could bring new contributions and new research, in terms of third age, as evolution or involution. Here, too, the level of society described is highly important, as is education, the environment and other historical contexts that can explain in one way or another, the aging.

Continuity theory speaks of adult development as a continuous process, a complex process of development that is not well understood, according to some authors (Dolinar, 2008), unlike the theory of activity that proposed new activities for retirement. It is a theory that came late to the attention of the sociology of aging, although it was mentioned for the first time in 1968 by George Maddox (Diggs, 2008b). Maddox noticed that people at the third age tend to engage in similar activities and continue their family lifestyle like before to retirement. This theory was recognized in 1989, thanks to Atchley (idem), who imposed it on the theoretical explanation of aging. Atchley describes continuity in terms of internal continuity (remembering the internal structure, mental structures of ideas, temperament, affection, experiences, preferences, dispositions and skills) and external continuity that is connected to past performance and can be seen between middle age and third age in terms of skills, activities, roles, relationships.

Continuity theory shows that continuity is actually a strategy for the success of the aging process. Continuity of personality means that changes can be incorporated into the unique characteristics of individuality. Continuity of activities allows people to prevent, compensate or minimize the effects of aging. Continuity of relationships preserves the system of social support of the individual.

Criticisms of the continuity theory came from feminist theories, in the sense that continuity theory defines normal aging by referring to the male model, although lately, research has been intensified on the elderly that include women in their samples. Continuity theory could also be criticized because it presupposes one's stay in the first phase of the individuation, or self-realization process described in analytical psychology. This phase is oriented towards Ego's development and precedes the phase of spiritual transformation (Sorea, 2014).

In the next subchapter I will present the "The Seniors Academy" project, from idea to implementation.

3. Presentation of "The Seniors Academy"

The Day Care Center for the elderly is a center that has been functioning for many years in the Residential Center for Elderly People from Braşov. Its funding is from the local budget, the center being part of the services provided by the Social Services Institution from Braşov. It is a social center where socializing and leisure activities are offered both for institutionalized elderly people and for the people outside the hostel. Within the center various activities are constantly held such as: reading, excursions, ergotherapy, social games (rummy, table, bingo), dance, music. Also, the elderly enrolled in the day center, constantly participate in various social events, with music and dance activities.

The idea of the project "Seniors Academy" started from the people who attended the Day Center. As the activity theory recalls, elderly people have a higher degree of life satisfaction if they have informal activities with their friends. Thus, in addition to the formal activities proposed by the Center, they asked for other activities with learning and personal development. This is how the idea of the "Senior Academy" was born, a replica of the university courses, but with an emphasis on the wishes of the elderly and the usefulness of these courses for them.

The goals of the "Seniors Academy" project were formulated according to the requirements of the elderly. This is it:

- increasing the visibility of the elderly community;
- preventing crime against the elderly;
- promoting a healthy lifestyle;
- promoting the concept of active aging;
- changing social attitudes to encourage seniors to use modern technology to improve their quality of life.

Thus, during the project, the following courses were carried out from 1 November 2016 until 30 June 2017, 2 hours / month, for each course:

- First aid courses - courses supported by the Red Cross Braşov;
- Crime prevention courses - supported by Braşov Police;
- Courses to promote a healthy lifestyle - supported by the Public Health Institution Braşov;
- Personal development courses - supported by Transilvania University of Braşov.

I will describe the courses that Transilvania University of Braşov was responsible for.

Personal development courses were supported by a professor and students of the Faculty of Sociology and Communication at the Day Care Center for the elderly.

The beneficiaries were 15 elderly people aged 65-85.

Personal development courses were elaborated with the beneficiaries. The following topics emerged:

- Inter-cognition exercises (test of appreciation of self-esteem, expression of desires and knowledge);
- information about the current demographic process and the increase of the share of elderly people in the current society: causes, consequences, actions;
- challenges of the new retirement status: change of identity, roles of the elderly; transition from active, working, to passive, retirement;
- digital technology courses.

The GANTT chart of the "Seniors Academy"

Table 1

Personal Development Courses	Nov. 2016	Dec. 2016	Jan. 2017	Feb. 2017	March 2017	April 2017	May 2017	June 2017
Intercognition exercises (test of appreciation of self-esteem, expression of desires and knowledge)	X							
Information about the current demographic process		X	X					
Challenges of the new pensioner: status change of identity, roles of the elderly; transition from active, working, to passive, retirement;			X	X	X			
Digital technology courses					X	X	X	X

The digital technology courses have been the most successful.

We involved students who worked with elderly people one by one and taught them to use smart tablets and smartphones they already had but did not use or had use them briefly (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).



The information requested by the elderly was how to create an account on social networks, how to protect their data, how to manage information on the devices, how to process pictures and videos already made. Because the desire to teach the elderly about the use of smart devices was great, these digital technology learning courses have been running weekly, increasing the number of sessions.

Fig. 1. Information session from one of the digital technology courses (picture from the author's archive, published with the consent of the project participants)



Fig. 2. Information session from one of the digital technology courses (picture from the author's archive, published with the consent of the project participants)

At the end of the project, I made an evaluation of the courses that consisted of a group discussion with the elderly about the information received and what they would still like to learn in the future. Personal development courses have been appreciated, and the elderly's desire was to introduce new courses about the legislation regarding older people, rights and opportunities and foreign languages courses. They also called for digital technology courses to continue.

4. Conclusions and Discussions

In recent years, we witnessed a change in the social image of old age due to the combination of the following factors (Taccani, 2003): a more open cultural approach; empirical studies of gerontological and geriatric nature that led to the emergence of conceiving aging as a passage involving imbalances and new balances; psychology stopped looking at the elderly only as compared to the young subject in terms of benefits; the reality that often offers "successful aging" models, elderly people that actually correspond to a new adult model.

In Western societies, we meet elderly people who continue to work (even part-time), who engage in volunteer activities, who are a strong support for their families, their children, care for their grandchildren, perform various domestic and administrative tasks; we meet elderly people who are massively involved in cultural and study activities, even if they do not attend universities for third age, but enroll in faculty courses or stay active producing significant amounts of self-consumption stuff; we meet elderly people engaged in activities such as gymnastics, swimming, hiking or other motor activities; others attend social centers / clubs for an active and interesting exchange, with either their own generation or other generations; we meet elderly people who are employed in trade unions, parishes, community recreation circles, social and health services where they support and complement the interventions of professionals.

The "Senior Academy" project is a response to the elderly's requirement to learn, to be informed and, ultimately, to stay in touch with society's evolution. It is the confirmation of the theory of activity, which is absolutely normal nowadays, when life expectancy is increasing and the retirement period is expected to be longer. Elderly people are aware that this free time must be filled with diverse, creative, informative and useful activities for the quality of their lives.

One of the program's limits was the fact that only non-institutionalized old people participated in this project. Although they were called to participate in the project activities, the institutionalized people refused to participate, especially for fear of not interacting with other elderly people outside the residential center, for fear of being labeled.

Certainly, the continuation of the project is absolutely necessary and required by the elderly. In this sense, steps for new courses have already begun, with emphasis on the wishes of the elderly and the inclusion of new collaborators in the project to come up with the required information.

Such projects demonstrate once again that the elderly want to remain active and in contact with society, taking into account the main needs signaled by them: cultural needs, social needs and information needs.

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