THE THIRD AGE IDENTITY CRISIS
- TRUTH OR DARE -

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Abstract: *The growing interest contemporary society shows toward senior citizens, especially from the demographic and socio-medical points of view, has led to intense debate globally. This debate has materialized in ways of raising awareness of, and rising sensitivity to the phenomenon, such as declaring the year 2012 "The year of active aging and solidarity among generations". The present work focuses on an aspect that hasn't been tackled by literature very often, but which needs to be the subject of a complex research: the senior citizens' identity. Retirement, the dissolution of the social network, the essential rearrangement of the "marriage nest" are the causing factors of the change or loss of identity during the third age, which can lead to the perception of senior citizens' lives in a way that is totally different from what is considered to be normal from a social point of view.*

Key words: *identity crisis, subjective wellbeing, roles of the elderly people.*

1. Introduction

Research has brought out the common issues that have become normal aspects of senior citizens' lives (medical, economic, transport issues). However, senior citizens are complex people who have other needs and problems than the ones mentioned above.

One of the problems refers to the funds of the social insurances, both of health, and of retirement, whose necessity is ever-increasing. Another major problem within a society with a high percentage of elderly population is connected to the constitution of the social and occupational frame for elderly persons, so that these ones might lead a civilized life. The researches in the field reveal the fact that the elderly persons and couples undergo a diminution of the living standard, in the majority of cases

[8]. To these a special social-psychological situation is added, that we may difficultly understand unless we experience it. This is the professional unemployment, the retirement from the work of the persons who are still capable, available both intellectually and culturally. Subjectively driven in a process of recovery of the structures of the personality and of the self awareness through the dissolution of the professional sub-identity, third age persons are for society a source of experience, intelligence, aptitudes, which, within contemporary world, are totally neglected.

2. The third age identity crisis

The structure of the ego, the way a person's needs and impulses manifest themselves in his or her relationship with the environment, meets a new

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psychological context once he/ she has retired. Thus, the pensioner has to deal with a crisis of the professional interests and capacities used before retirement, accompanied by a prestige crisis. The person retiring has to change the professional interests into others such as the cultural or leisure ones. Unfortunately, in many societies, due to the low standards of living, the interest don't only change, they are reduced to household issues.

Identity as a psychological reality is linked to the problem of the self from two points of view [4]:
- the self (a part of what we are) consists of identifications with "objects" of the outside environment or of the close interpersonal one;
- we tend to keep our self-identity, to preserve the unity of the self in front of the pressure of different situations and events.

This is where the main issue raises: how can senior citizens keep their self-identity in the context of the contemporary economic-socio-psychological society?

The psychologist Erik Erikson [2][3] described identity as a process found within the individual but also outside him, in the culture of the community he belongs to, a point of view which has led to the establishment of a link between the individual and the community, the surrounding environment. Moreover, Erikson developed the term "identity crisis", term that he generalized to the level of a whole stage of life.

From Erikson's point of view, personality is determined by the interplay between growing up and the constraints of the surrounding environment. Its development takes place in eight stages and the engine that allows the passage from one stage to another is the conflict: of early childhood (the conflict trust/ distrust), of childhood (ages 1-3) (the conflict autonomy/ shame and doubt), of the age of play or pre-school (the conflict initiative/culpability), of the school age (the conflict endeavor/ inferiority), of adolescence (the crisis identity/ identity confusion), of the young adult (the crisis intimacy/isolation), of maturity (the dilemma generativity/ stagnation), of the third age (the contradiction between personal integrity and despair). Consequently, each stage is characterized by a crisis and the necessity to solve it, more precisely, getting over an inside - outside conflict, a healthy personality must include the oppositions between self and the others. Each crisis comprises a difference because the actors are different. It is characterized by a contradictory bipolarity, a positive role and a negative one, the individual choosing one or the other according to social requirements. Finally, each stage is dominated by a feeling that determines the general orientation of the behavior.

In the last stage, the elderly person has to deal with the contradiction between personal integrity and despair, between the wish to live happily and to grow old in dignity and the anxiety related to the anticipation of the great age, of the loss of autonomy and of death. The individual looks back on his life measuring the distance between the aims he has set and the goal he has reached. If the result is a positive one, the elderly people will have the feeling of wholeness, if not, they will have the feeling of despair. A small distance allows him to reach a feeling of wisdom expressed through a "philosophical" retreat which, together with the disengagement theory, makes the person chose social relationships of a spiritual nature. Erikson considers that this state of wisdom is the condition for successful aging [2].

It is remarkable that Professor Ilut has coined out a new term to explain this stage of identity formation, the "Hemingway

complex", starting from the well-known and widely used "Oedip complex" or "Electra complex" [5].

The "Hemingway" complex or syndrome, from the professor's point of view, refers to "the dramatic regret for the loss of youth and maturity full of self, with all their advantages: physical and intellectual health, erotic sexual desire and potency, vigorous projects, the optimism based on the conscience of the realistic capacities" [5] (p.337).

This somewhat negative point of view on old age is very often described in literature, therefore, I couldn't help but wonder when, during the research for my doctor's degree thesis ("Elderly People as a Resource in the Family and Society", Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 2009), in the section regarding the positive or negative evaluation of the lives of elderly people (research dating from the years 2007-2009, in Brasov).

I found out that the subjects evaluated their subjective well being in a positive manner, the grades given by the respondents ranging between 7 and 9 on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest grade.

As we can notice, contrary to what we perceive in everyday life, elderly people from the urban environment (the town of Brasov) evaluate their subjective well being in a positive way, the highest grades going to "the importance of the elderly person in the family" (8,62) and to the "evaluation of the joy of living" (8,25).

By way of contrast, the importance of the elderly person's role in society scored poorly (7.19), the other scores referring to the level of the pleasure of living are approximately equal, the average of the scores ranging between 7,36 and 7,83 (fig. 1).

These data show that the senior citizens of Brasov reach, however, personal integrity (the wish to live in a pleasant way and to age in dignity) at least according to their statements. Moreover, I have noticed that the degree of satisfaction related to their present existence grows according to the growth of their personal income and that the positive evaluation is higher with the people who, during their active lives, were involved in routine activities, without much responsibility.

However, what could be the source of this positive outlook on life from the part of senior citizens?

The changes brought about by retirement, the "empty nest" syndrome, the lack of social support, illness, disabilities, the thought of impending death are problems that elderly people can hardly face.

All these changes cause alterations in the person's identity. Pensioners have to redefine their identity as far as work is concerned. The parent facing the "empty nest" syndrome has to redefine his family identity by finding new goals in life.

A study carried out on senior citizens from Europe and Israel reveals the fact that they have redefined their identity after retirement, after an initial period of despair, an important role being played by social and community networks [9].

During the research I carried out in Brasov (2007) in order to reveal aspects of elderly people's lives, the answers people gave to the question "How is life after retirement?" ranged from enjoyment to difficulty:

"After retirement I felt lonely, I had no place to go to, no workmates to talk to." (Man – 70 years old).
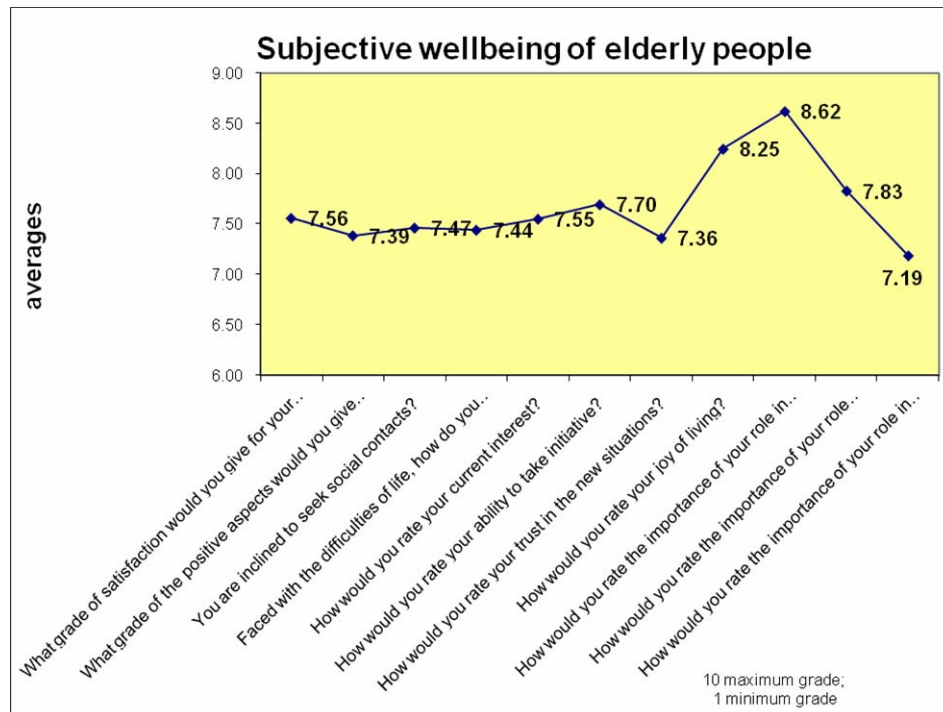
Fig. 1. *The state of subjective well-being of elderly people*

"Very nice because I traveled a lot, although I did it on my own, by my beloved train (...) I have seen most of Europe, except Portugal and Greece (...) A different life, a more beautiful one, I saw my extended family often."(Woman – 66 years old)

"Happy for the freedom to continue going out in the nature, for my daily walks, for reading and for watching documentaries on TV." (Woman – 62 years old)

"It was hard in the beginning. I woke up at 5 o'clock as if I had to go to school and I couldn't go back to sleep (...) It was as if I were more tired and sicker than when I had to go to school." (Woman – 74 years old)

Retirement can lead to crisis because the individual's identity is strongly influenced by his occupation [6]. These crises that are caused by retirement have a strong influence on the course of life and can result in material and relational loss and, in the end, a change of subjectivity. These crises of identity have a disruptive effect on the self image, on respect.

Moreover, retirement can be a crisis generating event when it occurs as a result of downsizing and layoffs at the working place, when, in order to avoid unemployment people are forced to retire (early retirement or early retirement on medical grounds) [1].

Women get used to the new situation more easily, being able, after retirement, to dedicate more time to their families and to housework. We can see negative effects in the case of women as well, especially with those who used to have a career or when retirement coincides with the children leaving home, bringing about the "empty nest" syndrome.

The environment can also contribute to the effects of retirement. Thus, in the urban environment retirement is more difficult to cope with than in the rural one. The life of the pensioner from the urban environment is reduced to the area of the room and to that of shopping. The answers to the interview guide applied on elderly people from Brasov have revealed this difference between the life of the pensioner from the rural area and that of the pensioner from the urban one:

"I go in the village, to the school, I spend time with the animals in the courtyard (...) Now I have got used to it, 50 chicks hatched in my incubator, I have bought 3 pigs and I find something to do in the yard all day long." (Woman - 68 years old, rural environment)

"First of all I wake up in the morning, I take a handful of pills after breakfast. Then I am terribly tired, I feel exhausted and nervous, I spend some more time in bed, I sit in my deckchair or fall asleep. This is how I spend my time until 12 o'clock. In the afternoon, if I feel all right, I go for a walk for an hour or two. At 4p.m. I always come home, to watch a soap opera (...) Then I have dinner, I take my medicine, I watch TV and at about 8 – 8.30 p.m. I get ready to go to bed." (Man – 64 years old – urban environment)

Maybe retirement should be made according to the state of health of the individual, to his/ her financial status and, of course, according to the person's attitude towards retirement [6].

The modification or change of self identity, during the third age, takes place according to each individual's past:
- those who had accomplishments and success during young age and who, at the age of retirement cannot accept a more modest way of life with a less intense social life;
- those who had accomplishments related to beauty, youthfulness, personal attraction, values that disappear with aging, bringing about a change in the system of values of the elderly person, which can lead to an identity crisis;
- those who had lives without accomplishments, without satisfaction and who, looking back, reach the conclusion that life is monotonous, empty.

Another dramatic event in the life of the elderly person, event that can affect his/ her identity, is widowhood, which, in industrial societies affects 65% of women and only 15% of men [6]. The difference resides in the difference of longevity between men and women, as well as in women's tendency to marry older men. Studies show that male widowhood is more difficult than the female one but, as gender social stereotypes change, men get more and more involved in housework and become more capable to adjust to widowhood.

The research carried out for my doctorate thesis has shown that the main source of identity for elderly people is family, family life, work being just a structuring factor. Therefore, retirement cannot be considered a traumatizing event for all individuals.

The study, carried out in the city of Brasov (2007-2009), shows that family represents the main source of identity, both in the active and in the passive periods, with the difference that, for elderly people, the main functions of family are: the socializing dimension, the economic dimension and the emotional dimension. Moreover, along with retirement comes a change in social interactions, the interpersonal relations of elderly people migrating from the ones involving their workmates or friends to the ones involving neighbors and family.

Another factor that can cause a crisis of identity is the elderly person's relationship with his/her family. Being a grandmother (father) is an important source of identity

for elderly people. But, in contemporary society, where the role of grandparent has been taken over by different institutions, where family mobility can break strong ties among its members, elderly people don't enjoy this role anymore. This is the case for the senior citizens of Brasov, 73% of whom are grandparents, but their answers reveal the fact that they rather fit into the category that literature [7] calls *remote grandparents*: they see their grandsons so rarely that their relationship is ritualic and symbolic – *42%* of the answers given. The other answers have revealed the fact that *28%* are *mate/ companion grandparents* (they have educative and leisure activities with their grandchildren) and *27,5 %* are *involved grandparents* (they live with their grandchildren and are in permanent contact with them).

3. Conclusions

We can conclude that the third age identity crisis is, at the same time, both truth and myth. On one hand, we can talk about an identity crisis, especially in the case of those people who held important positions in the social hierarchy and had formed their identity according to their work, having, at the third age, to reconsider their activities and wishes in order to cope in the best possible way with the "identity crisis". On the other hand, people who during their active period found family to be the source of their identity, have to redefine their identity by finding new goals in life once the "empty nest" syndrome has set in.

What I haven't studied yet, but remains a theme for future research, is the report between the auto-perceived self and the ideal self (the desired one). It remains to be seen whether or not elderly people evaluate

self-esteem, as well as life, in a positive way, just regarding disability, making use of the desired self.

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