

Later Life In Estonia: Satisfaction With Life And Intergenerational Support

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Abstract

Background: In the coming years Estonian society is facing great challenges related to the ageing of the population. In this context the knowledge on how older people cope with their life and on social support networks between generations is of vital importance. **Objectives:** The aim of the article is to analyse the functioning of networks based on family relations in Estonia. The data is derived from the survey of Estonian population "Estonia 2003" carried out by the family sociologists of the Tallinn University (the sample comprised of 1,558 people aged 15 to 69). From the total sample a group of older respondents (55 to 69 years of age) was separated for the purpose of the current analysis. **Results:** The data indicates that in spite of some shortages in coping with their daily life, like health complaints and economic constraints, older people still have a positive attitude and are satisfied with various areas of their life in Estonia. Compared to other domains of life, the assessment of economic situation is the lowest: only 37 per cent of respondents were satisfied with it. It is therefore important for the older people to have a job. Employed persons are able to cope better, which also improves their self-esteem and reduces the level of stress. However, many healthy persons (46 per cent) in this age group who are actively employed are afraid that they might be excluded from the working life. Older people are more satisfied with their family life than other age groups in Estonia and we can observe close relationships of mutual support between generations. The majority (92-93 per cent) of people between 55 to 69 years of age are satisfied with their relations with their adult children.

INTRODUCTION

While analysing changes confronting us in the 21st century, researchers emphasise that the principal events will take place in the demographic sphere. Namely, the proportion of elderly people will gradually exceed the number of younger ones, and among the older population there will be an increase of the oldest old. These changes will affect all aspects of human life – the composition of a family, living conditions and social support as well as economic activities, employment and social insurance (1).

The society shapes age models on which the well-being of elderly people depends. Research studies indicate that most people know very little about old age and most have wrong, stereotypical and negative perceptions termed Agism. Old age is described as process of degeneration, a voyage towards the inutility, unproductiveness, etc. (2).

There are also positive references in the literature towards old age and aging. Saying such as: „elderly people have more free time on their hands”, „they are good hearted”, „they give presents and pamper” (3).

Although studies show that the later phase of life can be healthy, productive and filled with satisfaction with life, still ageism and fear for ageing is a widespread phenomenon (4).

Vikström (2001) emphasises that also the market economy policy and the liberalist ideology contain a negative attitude towards elderly people, relating them to the notion of “a person with a minus sign”. Economic thinking is decisive and people are assessed on the basis of their success, usefulness and money. In that kind of thinking everything acquires a market price, including people, and therefore the elderly, especially the sick and the disabled people, acutely feel that they are useless, valueless and not needed (5).

Old age as a part of human lifespan has been reassessed: it is no longer viewed as a miserable stage of life and negative attitude towards ageing and old age has been substituted by the concept of ageing well, according to which old age has its choices and alternatives. Several studies (e.g. 1, 6, 7, 8, 9) have been published, including those of Estonian researchers (11), where the keywords include successful, new, productive, resourceful, creative, positive, healthy ageing.

Increasingly more often the glance directed outwards, as Giddens puts it, is pointed to elderly people, because many old people have found their goal in life in the so-called third youth and thus a new phase of learning and self-improvement has begun (12, 13). It has been stated that elderly people who pursue an active lifestyle and use the learning opportunities offered to them, enjoy higher self-confidence and self-esteem, greater urge to learn and to acquire knowledge, vitality and better health than their passive peers (11).

However, many sociological surveys have shown that it is not easy to change the opinion of the society. In spite of an increase in the average life expectancy and the fact that older people have become more vital and socially active, many people think that due to poverty, solitude and poor health older people may have more problems that they admit (14).

Research reveals that the image of old age and the reality do not always coincide. This raises the question whether today the potential of older people is used to the maximum (6). Researchers have also outlined the obstacles to successful ageing: not enough value is attached to the social capital of older people, their prestige is decreasing in the eyes of young people (the networks and integration of older people are assessed as poor, the knowledge accumulated during their life is considered outdated, their training and qualification is not valued, etc.), leaving or losing the job is accompanied by the loss of former support network of communication, and also the attitude, according to which older people are conservative and stagnated (9). Elderly people experience hostile and unfavourable attitudes and consider it unfortunately justified, which reduces their self-confidence and the feeling of security (15). Due to those circumstances, age discrimination, which has been called the last unrecognised discrimination, has emerged as an important research question (7).

There are also studies confirming that “stereotypes that depict older people as depressed, withdrawn and rigid, are myths” (16). The opinion of employers that older employees are often absent from work because of illnesses, is not always true. According to studies (15), in comparison with their younger colleagues, older workers have fewer work-related injuries and their work-attendance is better. There are also studies of office and sales personnel disproving the wide-spread opinion that in comparison with young people older employees have lower productivity.

It is important to change the negative attitude towards

elderly, because work gives older people economic independence, an opportunity to satisfy their need for communication, helps to increase their self-esteem, etc. (17, 18). In addition, the further development of the society as a whole depends largely on how successfully the part of the population who has reached its third stage of life, retirement, is integrated into working life. Without relevant application this age group will become a huge burden on the society, first and foremost in the economic sense (19). For that reason, it is especially important to support the coping ability of elderly in Estonia so that they could work.

When growing old people become more dependent on their social networks. Studies have emphasised not only pressures stemming from assisting, but also negative aspects of three generations living together (20, 21). Telephone communication between the young and older people is widespread, which enables the elderly to retain contact with their children living further away. At the same time the researchers emphasise that the decreasing number of adult children and their growing migration poses the question of assisting the elderly (22). It has been studied which factors influence the living together of elderly and adult children. The researchers found that poorer relatives live more often with their parents than richer ones. The living together of multiple generations is a source of support for the children as elderly can use some domestic services (e.g. kitchen equipment, telephone service) more cheaply than when children use them independently (23). The study of Hillcoat-Nalletamby, Dharmalingan & Baxendine (2006) shows that the married status of elderly and children, religious standpoints and ethnicity, are important factors that influence the solidarity of a parent-child relationship. Relationships and attitudes towards living together are based on duties and beliefs that parents need to be re-paid for the help they have given in the past (21).

There are two views on the influence of the multitude of roles. On one hand it has been said that the multitude of roles decreases the time of the caregiver and leads therefore to psychological stress (25).

But there are also researchers who emphasise the positive effect of the multitude of roles for the caregiver. According to this perspective the multitude of roles increases and enriches person's effectiveness and self-esteem, because one feels directly or indirectly the rise of status and in this way the multitude of roles can act as a buffer for the stress that accompanies the role of care-giving (26, 27, 28). Whether the multitude of roles increases or decreases the level of

stress is according to authors purely a question of the specific situation. According to Penning (27) the answer depends on whether one receives some benefits for caretaking, whether this role has been chosen voluntarily, etc.

The need to define the problems of older people and describe their situation in the society has prompted several population and sociological surveys in Estonia (11, 18, 19, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34). In 2000, in the framework of a joint project of the Open Estonia Foundation and the Estonian Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics, a national survey "Study of coping and health of elderly residents of Estonia 2000" was carried out (35), which gives an overview of people older than 65 years of age and of oldest old (80+). Researchers were interested in how older people were coping with their life (economic coping and whether they needed assistance in coping with everyday activities), health (problems with vision, hearing, mobility, etc., consumption of medications, level of dementia, etc.), problems of voluntary self-help movement, etc.

The above mentioned surveys give an extensive overview of the problems of health and economic coping of the Estonian old age population.

In Estonia 32.8% of population are 50 to 79 years old (36) and the least attention has been paid to the older middle age – 55- to 69-year-old people, which, according to statistics is a relatively large population group that is growing year by year.

In Estonia the number of children in a family is decreasing, the age of women giving birth is increasing and as a consequence the number of relatives per elderly person will fall. There are some comforting opinions that those trends do not necessarily cause a decrease in informal networks as a person who has a small network but whose relations in it are frequent, still receives the help he or she needs (37). On the other hand, researchers have found that the size of the network matters and people with a smaller number of supporters are at a greater risk of health deterioration (38). Ross & Mirowsky (2002) have explained that good family relations and an opportunity to phone someone in case of an illness increase the feeling of security towards the future in older people (39).

Since Estonian society is ageing and families are getting smaller and more unstable, solidarity between generations

becomes an issue. In the past, families consisting of several generations were wide-spread in Estonia, especially in rural areas, where grandparents, parents and grandchildren lived under the same roof. Now this form has been replaced by nuclear families where parents and children live together but the older generation lives separately (40). It has also been found that people's individual goals and values have become more important, which raises the question, whether the increased individualism can endanger intergenerational support and to what extent can we speak about solidarity between generations (41). The existence of this danger also in Estonia is confirmed by the fact that Estonian women consider self-realisation to be a very important value (42). Even under the conditions of hypothetical material security where working is not necessary, women do not wish to stay at home. The reason for that is a high educational level of Estonian women, which has contributed to their need to realise themselves through work (43).

From the above a question can be derived – to what extent are the needs of older people as a relatively large group of the population met in Estonia? One of the indicators of the level of development of the society is how 55- to 69-year-old people are coping and to what extent social networks, first and foremost children, have helped older people to cope in various spheres of life.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

The aim of our article is:

1. To analyse how 55- to 69-year-old people have been coping with their life, how satisfied they are with various areas of their life, and to learn about their self-assessment.
2. To describe the network of intergenerational relations, mutual help, how much assistance 55- to 69-year-old people receive from their children and to what extent they help their adult children.

The data is based on the population survey "Estonia 2003" carried out by the family sociologists of the Tallinn University. The sample was derived from the population register and it covered people aged 18-64. The questionnaires were mailed to home addresses along with a pre-paid response-envelope. The total number of mailed questionnaires was 3982 and the number of returned questionnaires 1891. For different reasons (incomplete questionnaire, etc) the final sample size was 1558.

The present study is focused on the age group 55-69 (22 per cent of the total sample, N=346), but for the purpose of comparison also other age groups are included.

General characteristics of the 55-69 year-old group:

- Most (90 per cent) elderly people had children.
- The proportion of male and female respondents was 42 per cent and 58 per cent respectively.
- 64 per cent of the 55-69 year olds were married or cohabiting, 17 per cent were widowed and 19 per cent were singles, divorced or separated.
- 29 per cent of them had lower than secondary education.
- 44 per cent of 55-69 year olds were actively employed.
- 22 per cent lived alone and 33 per cent with children.

VARIABLES USED IN THE STUDY

In order to analyse the assessments of satisfaction with various areas of life (health, economic situation, family life, work and life in general), the same type questions were used, beginning with, "How satisfied are you with ... ?" The questions were answered on a 5-point scale: not at all, generally not, hard to tell, generally satisfied, and completely satisfied.

The level of psychological tension was studied with the question: "How often have you recently had the feeling of not coping with your life?" The response options were the following: almost every day; once or twice a week; once or twice a month; less frequently; never. In a similar way the respondents were asked about other stress complaints (fatigue, anxiety, and depression) and health problems (headache, sleeping disorders, dizziness, and heart complaints).

The activities given up due to economic reasons within the last 12 months were studied in the following categories: buying foodstuffs; going to the cinema or theatre; buying books, subscribing to magazines or newspapers; receiving guests; visiting relatives/friends living somewhere else; buying medications. The response options provided were: often, sometimes, never.

To discover the factors influencing people's well-being at

personality level, we proceeded from the concept of life control, according to which the source of mental stress lies in the person's low self-esteem and self-confidence, when they do not believe in their abilities and think that the success of their activities mainly depends on external factors, such as luck, chance and fate (44, 45). The direction and nature of self-assessments were checked by two statements, agreeing with which indicated positive self-esteem: hardships in my life are not greater than those in other people's lives; and I think I have coped well in my life so far. The response options were: I completely agree, I generally agree, it is hard to say, I generally do not agree and I do not agree at all.

The nature of informal networks and mutual help in the family was studied in the form of assistance provided by children to older people and by older people to children. In the current article we emphasise that a differentiation is made between caretaking and nursing of the elderly and in a simpler form helping and communicating with them in everyday life (46). Since in our sample the elderly are not so old or ill that they would need nursing, we look at four areas when talking about how the children help their parents: The assistance young people had given to their parents was researched with the question: "Have you received help from your children within the last 12 months in the following areas?". Four areas were specified: 1) monetary support (small loans) 2) help with housework (cooking, doing the laundry, etc.), 3) assistance in practical tasks (renovation, building, transport, etc.) and 4) emotional assistance (communication, speaking about their worries). The response options were: I have occasionally received help; I have regularly received help; I have never needed such help.

Assistance from 55- to 69-year-olds to their children was studied with the question: "Have you helped your children within the last 12 months?". The four areas of assistance listed above were used again also here. In addition we looked at how often older people had helped with looking after their grandchildren. The response options to those questions were: it is not possible to help anyone with this matter; they have not asked for help; I have regularly helped them; I have occasionally helped them.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

In the concept of well-being or coping with life, the Finnish sociologist E. Allardt (1993) has distinguished between three components: living standard (Having), social relations

(Loving) and self-realisation, dignity (Being), which could also include the state of physical health (47). When developing the index of coping with life in the old age, successful ageing – AGEWELL, researchers have relied on people’s subjective assessments (6). We have also used subjective assessments of people in our work, whereas the variables included into the study (economic situation; relations with children; self-confidence; health assessments; satisfaction with various areas of life) cover collectively Allardt’s concept of well-being.

As a parameter allowing us to conclude how pleasant life is for older people, and how they are coping with it, we used their assessments of satisfaction with various areas of life. The limitation to the survey was that respondents might have interpreted the satisfaction questions differently. E.g. we do not know whether satisfaction with family life means for the respondents satisfaction with family members still living in the same household or satisfaction also in the case when family members live separately, or satisfaction with at least one closest person.

Figure 1

Table 1. Assessments of satisfaction with various domains of life of people of different ages, %, 2003

Completely or mostly satisfied with:	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-69
Health	82	70	67	57
Economic situation	36	31	31	37
Family life	73	74	77	82
Work	85	80	84	76
				N=152
Life in general	77	70	69	69
N	318	313	314	310

Table 1 gives an overview of the assessments of various domains of life of people in different ages, which are relatively similar, therefore correlations between age and assessments of satisfaction are not significant in the majority of the areas studied. The only significant correlation was found between age and satisfaction with health ($r=-0.25$, $p<.000$). Also older people are more than other groups satisfied with their family life.

In comparison with other areas of life, the assessment of economic situation is the lowest: among people aged 55 to 69 there are only 37 per cent of those who are satisfied with it. Although satisfaction with economic status was low in other age-groups as well, we have to point out that in over-55-year-olds age group the percentage of positive answers was higher than on the average. However, satisfaction with economic status might not describe the

situation accurately. This might be due to the fact that there might be serious economic shortcomings, but older people are used to limiting their expenses and are therefore more satisfied with their economic status. In order to give a more precise description of the economic situation, it is essential to know in which areas older people have been constrained due to the shortage of financial means the most.

Figure 2

Table 2. Giving up various things/activities due to economic hardships within the last 12 months by age groups, %, 2003

Given up "often" within the last 12 months	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-69
Buying some necessary foodstuffs	6	9	16	19
Going to the theatre, cinema	36	34	40	46
Buying books, subscribing to magazines and newspapers	34	36	45	47
Receiving guests	10	16	20	24
Visiting relatives/friends living elsewhere	22	27	35	37
Buying medications	5	9	14	13
N	313	315	301	309

The answer it is not important for me coincided to a large extent in different age groups. The smallest proportion of people giving this answer occurred in case of buying foodstuffs, visiting friends and buying medications (5-8 per cent) and the largest in case of going to the theatre and cinema (19 per cent).

Table 2 shows that the ratio of being forced to give up certain things raises rapidly after the age of 45. Compared to other age groups, people older than 55 years are forced to limit their expenses the most. They have more problems with obtaining the desired selection of foods (correlation with the indicator of age $r=-0.12$, $p<.000$). It is also worth noting that data about older men and women is relatively similar. At the same time older women point out shortages in going to the theatre or cinema and buying books ($r=-0.14$, $p<.000$). Taking into consideration that many older people live alone, it would be important for them to communicate with relatives and friends living elsewhere, visit them or receive guests ($r=-0.12$, $p<.000$). In this area older people also find that their economic conditions restrict them. Financial hardships while buying medications are especially noticeable ($r=-0.17$, $p<.000$).

Another area where assessments of satisfaction reflect the existence of problems is health. As expected, here the data reveals that with the increasing age the number of people satisfied with their health decreases.

There is a significant correlation with age in case of certain health complaints: sleeping disorders ($r=-0.17$, $p=.000$), indigestion ($r=-0.10$, $p=.000$), heart complaints ($r=-0.32$, $p=.000$). At the same time there was no correlation with the

indicators of psycho-emotional state (the feeling of not coping, anxiety, depression, fatigue). Such result could refer to the positive outlook of older people, which allows them to overcome hardships more easily.

This assumption is confirmed by the attitudes of older people. When we studied how high the number of self-confident people was among them, it appeared that:

- Three quarters (75 to 77 per cent) of both young people and those aged 55 to 69 admitted that they think they have coped well in their life so far;
- While responding to the statement hardships in my life are not greater than those in other people’s lives, the proportion of those agreeing was quite similar among both younger and older people (84 per cent of younger and 87 per cent of older people agreed with the statement).

Positive attitude towards life does not necessarily mean that 55 to 69-year-old people do not face hardships. We could see that although older people are as satisfied with their economic situation as other age groups, they encounter more problems in coping with their everyday life because of the shortage of material resources. That gives us a reason to ask whether older people receive external assistance for coping with their life and for satisfying their needs.

NEED FOR ASSISTANCE

We were first and foremost interested in family networks, the functioning of which we viewed as two-directional – from adult children to their parents and from older parents to their children. We measured the informal assistance with the following dimensions:

1. Material assistance – financial help
2. Non-material assistance – help with field and garden work, redecoration, transport, looking after children, etc. This also includes moral, emotional support, an opportunity to speak about one’s worries.

When asking older people about their need for assistance, there is a noticeably high proportion of responses I have not needed such help (75per cent had not needed a loan, almost 60 per cent had not needed help with everyday tasks, 30 per cent with practical tasks, and emotional support was not needed by 30 per cent). Another aspect that stands out is that

when parents had needed help, it was overwhelmingly occasionally. In most cases it is women who have regularly received help from their children, primarily with practical tasks (24 per cent) and emotional support (31 per cent).

While looking at help received by the grown-up children, also many children do not need their parents’ assistance. Even if they do ask for such help, it happens only occasionally. Women are characterised by the highest percentages of giving help. Half of the women have given financial help (a small loan) to their children and helped them with practical tasks as well as looking after their children. The percentages of providing emotional support (83 per cent) and looking after grandchildren (70 per cent) are again especially high for women. Our data might give the idea of constant reciprocal borrowing within families. Apparently in most cases it is monetary support that will not be reclaimed.

FROM CHILDREN TO PARENTS

Figure 3

Table 3. Receiving economic assistance and emotional support from children, depending on working/being retired, men and women aged 55 to 69, %, 2003

Receiving economic assistance <i>often or occasionally</i>	Men %	N	Women %	N
Pensioner	37	75	31	110
working person or working in spite of having retired	5	65	13	87
Receiving emotional support <i>often or occasionally</i>				
Pensioner	67	75	76	110
Working person or working in spite of having retired	50	65	86	87

Economic assistance needed from grown-up children depends on whether the parent is working, is a working pensioner, or has retired. The fact of working seems to have given men the feeling of material security and satisfied their basic needs, since only some of them admit that they have borrowed money from their children. The situation changes dramatically when they retire and have no additional income. In that case 37 per cent of men have asked their children for material support. A similar tendency can also be noticed in women.

While working, pensioners display the smallest need for material assistance, but the situation with emotional support is completely different. It appears that it is working female pensioners who need emotional support the most. The difference for men and women is noticeable – 50 per cent of men and 86 per cent of women admit needing emotional

support. Naturally the question arises why older women who work have an especially high need to talk to their children, speak about their concerns and ask for their children’s advice.

FROM PARENTS TO CHILDREN

Table 4 indicates that 55- to 69-year-old people, who are working, have better possibilities for supporting their children economically, and men and women are equally active in providing support (71 per cent of men and 69 per cent of women). The assistance from pensioners who do not work is considerably smaller.

Figure 4

Table 4. Assistance older people offer to their children depending on whether they work/are retired, 55 to 69 years of age, %, 2003

The type of assistance (helps children often or occasionally)	Men (N = 140)		Women (N = 197)	
	retired	Working (incl working pensioners)	retired	Working (incl working pensioners)
	N = 75	N = 65	N = 110	N = 87
Economic assistance:	48	71	50	87
Help with daily housework:	27	43	51	41
Help with practical tasks:	51	64	26	28
Looking after grandchildren:	61	57	63	72

However, this is not the only area where older people help their children. Let us, for example, have a look at the assistance with housework (cooking, doing the laundry, and other jobs). It would be natural to assume that those going to work have less time and opportunities to help their children. Nonetheless, it appeared that a relatively large number of older working women (41 per cent) assist their children with housework.

Looking after grandchildren and taking care of them are areas where the percentage of helping is the highest in the women’s group. 72 per cent of the women who go to work look after their grandchildren. Men’s help is greater in practical tasks (renovation, building, transport, etc.), especially in the group of men who go to work.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SATISFACTION WITH LIFE – ANOVA ANALYSIS

Satisfaction with life can be seen as a generalised indicator of coping, which reflects people’s subjective assessments of life in general. Although the variation in factors of subjective well-being is not always similar to the variation in objective

factors, research has demonstrated a significant correlation between satisfaction with work and family life and satisfaction with life in general (48, 49).

The mean life satisfaction of Estonian population on the 5-point scale is 3.55. Life satisfaction is highest in the younger age groups (3.66 -3.78) and in the group of older people (55-69) this indicator is lower – 3.51.

We applied the ANOVA analysis to establish which factors among those discussed above influence the development of life satisfaction of older women and men the most, and how men and women differ in those aspects. Table 5 lists only the indicators significantly influencing the development of life satisfaction.

Figure 5

Table 5. The influence of various domains of life, self assessments, health, economic situation and receiving and giving help on life satisfaction, ANOVA, F, p

	Men		Women	
	F	Sig (p)	F	Sig (p)
Assessments of satisfaction				
Economic situation	10.78	0.000	10.64	0.000
Health	7.48	0.000	6.52	0.000
Family	-	-	13.52	0.000
Work	12.87	0.000	-	-
Relations with adult children	-	-	11.25	0.002
Spending leisure time	2.67	0.03	3.15	0.01
Things/activities given up due to economic reasons				
Foodstuffs	5.33	0.002	18.01	0.000
Cinema, theatre	5.86	0.001	8.41	0.000
Books, magazines	7.97	0.000	7.87	0.000
Receiving guests	6.86	0.000	14.66	0.000
Visiting others	3.22	0.02	10.37	0.000
Medications	-	-	12.83	0.000
Health and stress indicators				
Feeling of not coping	5.13	0.02	14.64	0.000
Fatigue	2.43	0.05	5.25	0.001
Depression	4.35	0.003	5.43	0.000
Headache	2.81	0.03	5.87	0.000
Dizziness	-	-	9.37	0.000
Loans				
Received from children	13.71	0.000	5.52	0.02
Given to children	7.25	0.001	3.82	0.02
Self assessments				
Hardships in my life are not greater than those in other people’s lives	2.33	0.05	-	-
I think I have coped well in my life so far	6.59	0.000	5.08	0.001

- First we see that in the sections under study, one characteristic feature common to men and women emerges – the strongest predictors of increase or decrease in life satisfaction are changes in the economic sphere of life – e.g. in the group of men it is apparent in the assessments of satisfaction with economic situation (F=10.7, p=0.000), and also in the section of “giving up” (giving up some foodstuffs, F=5.3, p=0.002). It can also be seen in receiving material assistance from children (F=13.7, p=0.000) and giving material support to children (F=7.2, p=0.000). Collectively the two indicators (dissatisfaction with their economic

situation + giving up some foodstuffs for economic reasons) explained 33 per cent of the negative variation in life satisfaction in men and 22 per cent in women.

- In both groups (men and women), life satisfaction is influenced to the extent of 12 to 16 per cent by whether material side of life makes people limit their cultural pursuits (going to the theatre or cinema, buying books, subscribing to magazines, etc.).
- Another aspect that emerges is communication, especially for women: for economic reasons they cannot visit their relatives and friends ($F=10.3$, $p=0.000$) or invite them for a visit ($F=14.6$, $p=0.000$). Those two indicators together explained 12 per cent of the variation in life satisfaction in men and 16 per cent in women.
- In men's and women's groups, the work and family spheres have a completely different effect on satisfaction with life. Satisfaction with work is the primary influence of men's life satisfaction ($F=12.8$, $p=0.000$), whereas for women satisfaction with family life ($F=13.5$, $p=0.000$) and relationships with their adult children ($F=11.2$, $p=0.002$) are essential. In women's group life satisfaction is also significantly influenced by the fact whether they have had problems with obtaining foodstuffs due to the shortage of money ($F=18.0$, $p=0.000$). Collectively those different aspects of family life (satisfaction with the family + satisfaction with the relations with adult children + giving up some foodstuffs for economic reasons) explained 30 per cent of the negative variation in life satisfaction in women (14 per cent in men).
- Satisfaction with health is an important indicator in both groups but giving up medications due to economic reasons influences women more ($F=12.8$, $p=0.000$). The effect of the indicator of stress (i.e. the feeling of not coping) on life satisfaction is also greater in women's group ($F=14.6$, $p=0.000$) as well as the presence of health complaints (e.g. dizziness, $F=9.3$, $p=0.000$). The listed factors explained 29 per cent of the variation in life satisfaction in women (17 per cent in men).
- The importance of the factors of self-confidence

for the development of life satisfaction became also apparent. Their influence is somewhat stronger in men's group, e.g. the attitude "I have coped well in my life so far" had an 18 per cent influence on life satisfaction ($F=6.5$, $p=0.000$).

By way of summarising, we can say that in spite of some shortages in their daily life, health complaints and economic constraints, older people still have a positive attitude towards life in Estonia and even help their children with material issues, daily tasks, looking after grandchildren and offering emotional support.

Our study clearly demonstrates that older people who are employed cope better with their life. Unfortunately, the efficient application of human potential has become a problem in Estonia because many healthy people aged 55 to 64 are afraid that they might be excluded from the working life.

DISCUSSION

The ageing of the population is accompanied by several acute problems that need to be solved. The question of social support has become a wide-spread area of research (37, 39, 41, 50, 51).

Our study shows that the assessments of people of different ages about various aspects of their life are relatively similar. In fact it is surprising that satisfaction with life does not depend on the age factor. The area, with which older people are somewhat more satisfied than other age groups, is family life. Among older people who are working, 76 per cent are satisfied with their work. Satisfaction in older people can be explained by the fact that for a working pensioner in Estonia the salary earned constitutes an essential prerequisite for coping with his/her daily life.

That generates the question – do older people want to work at all and how would they behave if their economic situation allowed them to stop working? It appeared that 80 per cent of the younger respondents would carry on working either full- or part-time, among the respondents aged 50 to 60 the respective percentage was 66 and in the group of 60- to 70-year-old people every other respondent would continue working (18).

Assessments of satisfaction also reveal problematic areas of life (economic situation, health) for older people. But also 18- to 24-year-old and middle aged people are not satisfied with the material side of their life in Estonia. The data shows

that the proportion of those satisfied with their health is lower in the group of 55- to 69-year old people when compared to middle aged people – 65 per cent and 84 per cent respectively. The same result has become evident also from other studies (35, 52).

Conversely, the indicators of psycho-emotional stress (anxiety, depression, the feeling of not coping) are not more frequent in the group of older respondents than they are in other age groups. This finding confirms the results of previous studies that the ability to cope with stress does not decrease with age, and older people manage to maintain emotional balance in difficult situations even better than younger ones (16, 53).

Attitudes of older people show that there are a lot of self-confident and balanced people among them. Three quarters of them think that they have coped well with their life so far and four fifths claim that the difficulties they face are not greater than those of other people's. Consequently, based on the assessments of satisfaction and attitudes, it is possible to say that according to their own assessments, older people cope with various areas of their life relatively well. Even if they have difficulties, primarily material, they try not to complain but find the positive side in everything and lead a balanced life. According to Tulva (2008) the foundation of the satisfaction of older people in Estonia is their optimism and ability to put up with the limitations of their welfare, for example the impediments deriving from their economic situation and state of health (11).

Also other researchers have claimed that in the contemporary process of ageing older people lead a longer, healthier and wealthier life. Sigelman & Shaffer (54) challenge the negative stereotype of retired people as – “useless, old, boring, sick, and dissatisfied with their life”. The authors include among the reasons for satisfaction with life in old age the disappearance or decrease of the earlier stressors. At that stage older people dedicate themselves more to home and lead a healthy life while new activities make up for the losses of ageing. Old age is not viewed in terms of drawbacks but achieving a new quality of life is essential. All that helps us to understand why many older people are enthusiastic about their life and their life satisfaction is as high as that of young adults (54, 55). Although the attitudes of older people are positive also in Estonia, the situation is not so ideal: older people have fewer opportunities for achieving a new quality of life, mostly because of the economic reasons when buying food and medications, and satisfying their needs of communicating

with friends.

Shortcomings in satisfying cultural interests are also negative. Women, especially older women, have a higher than average interest in culture, they like going to the theatre and concerts and reading books (56), but they cannot satisfy this need due to the shortage of money. In addition, taking into account that 22 per cent of older people live alone, it can be important for them to communicate with relatives and friends living elsewhere, visit them or receive them, but this is also restricted by the poor material situation.

The ANOVA analysis clearly demonstrates which aspects of life have the most critical effect on life satisfaction. The satisfaction with life of both men and women is influenced to the greatest extent by the indicators of economic situation. Among other areas of life the most important for men is satisfaction with work, for women, on the contrary, satisfaction with everything related to family life – relations within the family, getting on with the adult children, being able not to limit the selection of foodstuffs for material reasons. Another factor that is important for women is communicating with friends.

At the same time aspects indicating self-confidence are not as significant for women as they are for men. This result may be related to the fact that career and success in the sphere of work is especially important for men (43), which presupposes also higher than average self-confidence. Since according to research, women have a higher stress level than men (53, 57), it is predictable that in our survey the indicator of stress (the feeling of not coping) has a significant effect on life satisfaction in women's group. Let us, however, emphasise that this result is not related to age, because stress is a problem for women in all ages.

Difficulties in coping with everyday life prompt us to ask whether older people receive some external help. In our article we have paid attention to the nature and extent of the informal assistance from the family. First from children to parents. Here the importance of work is apparent. Older people who are employed ask for less assistance from their children, since their pension and salary cover for their main needs. The situation changes radically when the person retires and has no additional income from work. In those cases material assistance from children is sought more frequently (Table 3).

It is easier to understand the situation where a pensioner asks for a financial help from children, because the pension does

not cover the living costs, different things needed for normal life, eating properly and having hobbies. However, questions arise when children support their mother who is a working pensioner. One of the reasons may be that many older Estonian women do simple work in low-paid jobs. Men's salaries are higher than women's and therefore they do not need so much assistance from their children while employed (43).

The situation changes completely when emotional support is analysed (Table 3). It appears that it is the working women pensioners who need emotional support the most. This fact can have various explanations. Older women who work do not feel secure at work, they are afraid they may lose their job, because they perceive they are not able to compete with younger colleagues, especially in terms of contemporary requirements of language and computer skills. When they, for example, assess the prospect of becoming unemployed, the answer it is possible or it is very likely has been given by 29 per cent of 25- to 34-year-old women, whereas the percentage in the group of older women is 54 per cent. Therefore older people, especially women, try to hold on to their current jobs and very rarely change them, because they are aware that once leaving a job, it is very hard to find a new one. Men feel more secure (43). It is natural that in their insecurity women seek support, advice and encouragement from people close to them and it is very important that children really provide the needed support.

From the point of view of the ideal fulfilment of the function of a family, mutual assistance of family members is essential – also from parents to children. As to material assistance, several thought-provoking facts were found. Older people are sometimes very active in helping their children, even in terms of material assistance (Table 4). The results provided in the article reveal that 55-to 69-year-old people who work have much better opportunities for supporting their children, and in this respect both men and women are equally active. The assistance given by pensioners who do not work is noticeably smaller.

However, material assistance is not the only area where older people help their children. For example, it may be assumed that older people who work have less time and opportunity to assist their children with daily chores (cooking, laundry, etc.). But quite the opposite has been revealed by our study as a relatively large proportion of older working women help their children with daily housework (41 per cent) and in addition 27 per cent of them help their own parents. This may disclose a problem that

young people rely too heavily on the assistance of their parents as despite the fact that they go to work, a large proportion of older people assist their children's families after work. Taking care of their grandchildren might be difficult due to the fact that only 33 per cent of the grandparents live with their grandchildren. Of course, we have to take into consideration that our sample also included 55- to 59-year-old vital people.

At the same time it is especially important for older people to perceive that they are needed. As has been shown by previous research, the more often older people support others, the less lonely they feel (58). 72 per cent of older women who are working look after their grandchildren (Table 4). That would not be a problem if there was not one issue – namely, in the group of older women who regularly look after their grandchildren almost every other (47 per cent) has a high stress level (three or more stress complaints once or twice a week). Other studies have revealed that older people who look after their families have not displayed an increased risk of depression and anxiety when demands have grown (59). Since in our case the situation is the opposite, the reason may be that the younger generations do not always acknowledge the contribution of older people but take it for granted.

We assumed that older men participate to a lesser extent than older women in taking care of their grandchildren which was the case in the younger age groups and which caused strong stress for the wives of the younger men (Laidmäe 2001). However, the data concerning older people shows that 57 per cent of older working men claim that they are active in looking after their grandchildren. Obviously men's attitudes have changed with life and in older age they enjoy close relationships and looking after their grandchildren.

Our data reveals that in Estonia the network of intergenerational relations functions not only considerably actively but also in several directions, both as material support and assistance in daily chores (e.g. cooking) and practical tasks (e.g. redecorating), and also as giving/receiving assistance and consolation in case of stressful situations and worries. Questions may arise with the quality of the assistance provided by children, especially if in the majority of instances it is given occasionally. Empirical studies have shown that the quality of relations is more important for the development of well-being than their frequency (60). We can conclude from our study that obviously the frequency "occasionally" is sufficient for our respondents, since older people are satisfied with their

family life and life in general and the majority of them are completely or mainly satisfied with the relations with their children (92 to 93 per cent). At the same time, giving help only “occasionally” may not significantly increase life satisfaction, as revealed by the ANOVA analysis. However, the influence is noticeable in correlation with economic assistance. Since the shortage of money is a serious problem for older people, assistance received in this area even occasionally may in a difficult situation be of significant help, which eventually increases life satisfaction.

IN CONCLUSION: ARE OLDER PEOPLE A RESOURCE OR A PROBLEM?

In Estonia the relations between different generations are very intensive and they mutually help each other. We can speak about intergenerational solidarity.

Older people constitute an important resource in family life. Although in the family sphere women are somewhat more active helpers, men are not bystanders.

Older people cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group because those who are working cope best.

It is important for the older people to have a suitable job. In that case they need less help from the society and children and are able to help the younger generation and their own parents. That also improves old people’s self-esteem and reduces their stress level. Not only finding a job corresponding to their abilities is important for older people but also an opportunity to combine their professional work with other spheres of their life, e.g. caring for children, grandchildren and elderly parents as well as carrying on with their hobbies.

Older generation help young people most by taking care of their household and children. That has increased the solidarity within families and thus older people have found acknowledgement and a new way of self-realisation. Older people’s instrumental and emotional assistance also constitutes a great potential for the younger generation, especially in the period of destabilisation (divorce, poverty, problems at work).

The vitality of older people is admirable because they manage to work and also help the families of their children. They are satisfied with various areas of their life, they do not complain, their attitudes are balanced. It can be said that they are a harassed and hardened generation, who have had to experience a lot in their life and therefore their requirements of life are not very high. In addition to the above, another

source of their vitality is the knowledge that when in trouble they can rely on their children’s assistance and also the feeling that they are able to help others.

There is no reason whatsoever to consider older people a burden for the society or a nuisance. Instead, in Estonia more efficient application of human potential has become a problem because many healthy, vital and working age people aged 55 to 64 are afraid that they might be excluded from working life. For example, to the question, “What are your opportunities of finding a new job when a need arises?” 9% of the 29-year-old women answered that their opportunities are poor, whereas the proportion of the 55- to 64-year-old women giving this answer was 52%.

It is important that the value of older employees is about to increase. Strengths and resources of older employees have become the subject of research. As a concrete measure a handbook promoting employment of older women “The Employment of Older Women Workers in Estonia” (61) has been compiled in the framework of the international project of ILO “More and better jobs for women”.

Since our survey took place in 2003, we completely understand that by now the situation may have changed. Taking into consideration that the proportion of older people is still constantly growing, we think that by now the role of family care of the older middle age has increased and since the economic situation in Estonia is still not good, it is predictable that older people have to work in order to cope. Thus it may be assumed that the multiplicity of roles is the same or even greater than before.

We consider as the strength of our work that we have included various factors (assessments of satisfaction, self assessments, indicators of economic coping and health) in order to find out about the circumstances influencing life satisfaction of older people. We think that a special feature of our work is the investigation of family network and not only in one direction, i.e. children’s help to their parents, but also how older people help their children and parents.

Further steps: since family life is different in urban and rural areas, this aspect would need a more thorough study in the future.

Due to demographic processes the proportion of the middle-aged people has increased (primarily 45- to 54-year-old women) who look after their children and also their elderly parents. It would be necessary to carry out more extensive research on the so-called sandwich generation and their

problems also in Estonia.

KEY MESSAGES

- In spite of some shortages in their daily life, health complaints and economic constraints, older people in Estonia still have a positive attitude and are satisfied with various areas of their life.
- The relations between different generations in family are close and they mutually help each other.
- Older people constitute an important resource in family life.
- Older people cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group because those who are working cope best.
- The importance of working has appeared in various ways. The older people who work ask for less loans from their children than those only receiving their pension, and on the other hand, other family members are most frequently financially supported by the older people who work.

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