

STUDIES AS A PREVENTION OF SOCIAL ISOLATION FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

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***Summary** – The article presents results of the research which have been done at the UTA in Bratislava with the elderly students about their feelings, their attitudes, satisfaction and study motivation in their later life. The research contains also findings and opinions about loneliness and social isolation of elderly students. Studies at UTA can help them accept new conditions in a changing society and get over barriers of isolation and loneliness. Active ageing is very important phenomenon which is not frequent in each society of the elderly and not practice by each individual.*

***Key words:** Active ageing, Feelings of the elderly students, Motivation for education, Quality of life, Social isolation of the elderly*

In Slovakia as in the world also you can see many differences of lifestyle, many ways and levels of life for the elderly. Some of them are still active and try to find possibilities for approaching the social life of society. On the other hand, there are still a lot of old people who are excluded from society. They don't want or they do not need to participate, and sit at home without contacts with the outside world. It is a big and often problem for some elderly of our society. Important phenomenon in this situation is not the physical age of people, but that the influence usually has a chronic disease. It brings with it social consequences that may lead to the social isolation of a person.

The reasons, which I have mentioned, forced us to have an interest about the isolation of the elderly and to conduct a research on this topic. The research which was recently conducted by our UTA, focused on our students and their feelings of isolation before they came to the UTA. We were interested in the isolation of elderly and their loneliness. We tried to confirm the importance of education to eliminate loneliness, and to emphasize the purpose of education as a prevention of isolation for the elderly.

Different models are developed for categorizing, understanding and typology of the study motivation of the elderly. Many of them are related to personality, attitudes and expectations of the elderly in addition to factors related to the actual situation of the elderly learner and information about availability and organization of courses. The most important motive for participation is the wish to learn, the desire for personal development and for social contact.

In order to investigate the types of motivation at UTA in Bratislava, we took 414 students (Table 1) and asked them to choose from seven possibilities.

Studies and participation in courses are some of the possibilities of development as well as way of strengthening the position of the elderly in a changing society.

In current modern times there is an increase interest in the quality of one's own life and man's existence. Many of the old feel the need to study in order to make their life more purposeful. These intentions are very different, but there is one common denominator – the personal growth of an individual. The knowledge they gain

Table 1: Motivation for education

Type of motivation	No.	%
An interest to expand knowledge in other field	265	64
The need for a valuable use of their spare time	187	45
The fulfillment of a desire to undertake a university study	119	29
The need for social contacts	114	27,5
The need for innovating and expanding knowledge	86	20
An interest in expanding knowledge in own field	71	17
A desire to equal a partner, a friend, surrounding	19	4,6

Table 2: Feelings of the senior students

Feelings	No.	%
They feel better and younger	148	36
Their mood is more optimistic	116	28
They feel healthier	46	11
They are less prone to family problems	28	6,8
They are less occupied with their health problems	26	6,3
They are not affected by changes	22	5,3
They do not feel the social problems	16	3,9
They are trying to gain self-confidence	4	1
They remain pessimistic	2	0,5
Without a response	6	1,2
Total	414	100

help them to solve their life problems, to find new value systems, new philosophy of life and in such a way to increase their social activity.

We asked 414 students (Table 2), how they feel since they take courses at the UTA.

The level of education of people affects the relationship of that person in life and his attitude towards society. Better education and permanent education positively affects his outlook on life, and the attitude towards life for people all ages. For older people it guarantees a better understanding of aging and improves the quality of life for the elderly. Participation in life improves their psychical condition. Mrs. Zavalazova and Mr. Zaremba highlight the social changes that we can expect of older people in the next decades. In relationship to extending the middle years of life span, low birthrate, we experience radical **changes in the character of the family**. Higher co-existence of four generations, higher number of families with one child, and people that live alone. There will be an increase of education for older people, there will be a decrease in the spread of education between men and women. All this will positively affect the lifestyle, health, and will decrease disability, hence the **quality of life** will improve.

One of the most common efforts in people's life is to guarantee some degree of comfort and satisfaction. The achievement of this aim is usually associated with the term of the **quality of life**. This term contains a number of material, biological, psychological and cultural factors. Their representation and form in what secures the quality of life in different times and situations and they might be different for each person in question. The problem of quality of life is usually connected to the problem of values. People prefer to live in such a way that gives them satisfaction. The values that are sought after in order to achieve this goal depend on his personality, upbringing, his means and the support of his environment.

Why it is necessary in today's civilized society to search for, and offer to older people the adequate programs for **active ageing**? They have considerably more time once they retire and this will benefit them greatly. It will also improve their quality of life, and also prevent them from falling into a depression, or staying closed in their thoughts, and it will help those that are alone in their apartments, or retirement homes. Someone, who was accustomed during his life to satisfy his individual requirements, usually continues in the same activities. Sometimes it is just working in the gardens, providing care for their grandchildren, watching television programs, listening to the radio, but also learning and visiting of cultural events and sports activities. A well educated person can much easier overcome the hurdles of life. That is the reason why we started analyzing the affects of education on the psychology of the older people and also the prevention of his lonely life and isolation.

Our life expectancy is improving, people commonly reach an age well into their 80's. Many of them still live another quarter of their lives after reaching retirement age. It is important to live these years in dignity and with quality. If an older person won't find a fulfilling activity, there is a big chance of him falling into depression

Table 3: Reason for education

Reason for education	Number of participants	%
To improve quality of life by further education	50	76
General need for social contact	17	26
To gain new purpose in life	15	26
Desire for an organized program in UTA	7	11
Desire to find new friends	4	6
Desire to avoid loneliness	3	5
Other	3	5

and isolation. The students of UTA are more immune to these problems. During the last 20 years we have offered to our seniors the opportunity to remain in active contact with the rest of the world and with their peers.

In our latest not big research (Table 3) of 66 participants, we came to the conclusion that our students are coming to the University of Third Age (UTA) to fulfill their life long desire to complete their educational dream. Our main objective, however, was to monitor the changes they experience during the course of their studies. (Loneliness, social isolation, etc...) According to table 3 approximately one quarter of the participants come to our university because they are lonely. It proves that they are using our program to gain new experiences during the later years of their life. It gives them a new purpose.

It was very interesting to find that older people crave for a new purpose in life, something that up until now was unknown. It is nice to know, that UTA is becoming one of their reasons in life. Additional motivation was also to upgrade their knowledge and to gain additional information in life, i.e. not only the general upgrade of their education, but the implementation of the knowledge that has meaning in the later years of their life. Seniors are educating themselves not only their own personal gain, but also for the gain of the society.

For many of them to become old also means to become lonely. They should not retreat to loneliness, but should try to maintain contacts with their loved ones and with their friends. For many of them membership in clubs, UTA and also access to retirement homes is the opportunity to gain new friends. Loneliness and social isolation are problems of today's elderly. In today's society it is not a rarity to see an older person living alone. It is especially true for women, as they are living longer than men. For this very reason we have a higher percentage of female students than their male counterparts. The latest ratio is 89% female and 11% male. As per Hegyi, **social isolation** is removing someone from the society. Also for this reason the ratio of female students is higher than the male students. According to Striezenec, a social isolation is the removal of the individual from a group.

Social isolation is illustrating itself by people living alone either by an individual not being involved in family affairs, or collective activities. As per information obtained, we can understand the social isolation from two aspects.

1. positive social isolation (an individual that is alone purposely)
2. negative social isolation (someone that is excluded from the society against his will)

Isolation of an individual is not only a negative. People often seek to being alone. They think about their lives, about their needs, about their future goals. During this time of “self-examination” they prefer to be alone. In other words, social isolation can also be seen as a positive. It is important however, that this period is only temporary and not permanent. For those individuals that are unable to end their temporary isolation, the isolation will result in a decrease in quality of life. They will often experience depression and other problems. We were interested to know how often our students are in contact with their loved ones and how they are spending their free time. The results are tabulated in Table 4.

We can see from the above that only about half of the participants are in contact with their family members in a relatively short intervals. It is resulted by the age of Information Technology (IT) and the change in lifestyle of today’s society. On the other hand we can witness presence of those that read, or those that are improving their knowledge. Only 16 of the asked (24%) stated that the UTA is an activity that fills up their free time. At the same time we know, that all of the participants are students at the UTA. The participants also stated, that some of their other activities include watching TV, gardening, tourism, family and work related responsibilities, listening to music, learning of foreign languages, or voluntary work that take care of their free time.

One of the negative signs of our older generation is **loneliness**. External loneliness is visible when the person in question lives alone in his apartment, he spends

Table 4: Free time

Free time	Frequency of meetings			Amount of participants	%
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly		
With family	20	11	3	34	51
With friends	3	14	7	24	36
At UTA				16	24
Travelling				26	39
Reading				34	51
Cultural & sports event				29	44
Other				9	14

his free time alone and he does not have a mate. This is a visible reality. Internal loneliness can be characterized by the feelings of loneliness, inner unhappiness. (Průcha, J., Walterová, E., Mareš, J). Older people often find themselves in this situation. It would be interesting to know if the students of UTA experience loneliness, or if they found themselves being socially isolated before commencing their participation in our programs. Consequently, was their participation in our programs beneficial for their welfare? We were pleased to learn that 56 participants (85%) did not feel any loneliness prior to commencement of studies (Table 5). Only eight of them responded (12%) that they were lonely, one of them felt stagnation and one did not respond.

While analyzing the emotions of our students that enrolled in our programs (Table 6) we learned that 71% felt better even though in the previous questionnaire they indicated that 85% of them did not feel lonely. They stated that since they started our program they widened their horizons, they felt more satisfied and happy, they feel fulfilled, had better contact with people, they do not feel stressed, they have a new purpose in life, and their self esteem has improved.

Table 5: Feelings of loneliness prior to Enrollment

Lonely before started education	Number of participants	%
Yes	8	12
No	56	85
Other	1	1,5
Did not respond	1	1,5

Table 6: Changes of feelings caused while studying at UTA

Changes of feelings caused while studying at UTA	Number of participants	%
Improvement of feelings	47	71
No change	6	9
Do not know	12	18
Did not respond	1	2

Table 7: Inner satisfaction resulted by participation at UTA

Inner satisfaction	Number of participants	%
Yes	57	86
No	1	2
Do not know	6	9
Did not respond	2	3

In the next segment (Table 7) we learned that studying at UTA gives our students an inner satisfaction (aside from a wider knowledge and new information), which is an important factor for our elderly.

For obtaining an inner satisfaction it is important to know how to adapt to new conditions and facts faced by the new students. **Social adaptation** is not usually a problem for seniors of the UTA. Although they are exposed to a new environment, to a new collective, and a new daily activity, they are adapting to it without major problems. Of course, a certain amount of tolerance is necessary for the sake of the group. The pedagogical dictionary defines the social adaptation as an ability to conform to new or changed social conditions. For an older person it is harder to adjust. The older the person, the harder it is for him to change his habits, and it is harder for him to adjust to new conditions. Elderly are afraid to take risks, reduced energy, or to find something new. Lack of enthusiasm, or decreased amount of adaptability results that any unforeseen experience can upset the equilibrium. (Bartko)

Looking at other elements of education of the elderly it is obvious that a person as a social being is constantly exposed to the elements of **social environment**, let it be positive or negative. Money is losing its importance, but they appreciate much more human contacts and expressions of genuine friendship. They are more sensitive, and that is the reason why they recognize the indifference of their family, and that is why they appreciate the possibility **to be reintegrated into society**.

Expanding the network of social contacts (Table 8) and to increase the frequency of meeting people (Table 9) in comparison with the past, is the goal of our educational activities at our university. The majority of our students have expanded their network of contacts, which is beneficial in their fight against social isolation.

Table 8: Contact augmentation by participation at UTA

Contact augmentation	Number of participants	%
Yes	52	79
No	8	12
Do not know	3	4,5
Did not respond	3	4,5

Table 9: Frequency of meetings in comparison with the past

Increase of personal meetings	Number of participants	%
Yes	42	64
No	16	24
Do not know	5	7,5
Did not respond	3	4,5

Based on newly acquired contacts, our students are meeting with other people more frequently than was the case before they started our program. They value their new friendships, common interests, the possibility of communication, participation in new events, exchange of experience, recollection of childhood memories, “get-togethers” with old schoolmates. When responding “No” they stated the following: I am glad to be alone, I am exhausted, I have my circle of friends, I don’t have time, my time is filled with activities in voluntary organizations.

We were also interested in the opinions of some that are under the impression that older people are more isolated from the society than other segments of society. We were expecting positive answers based on the opinion of the older generation. Results are shown in Table 10. According to the participants of this study, 62% think that older people are isolated from the society from the moment they reach retirement age.

When investigating if UTA contributes toward eliminating loneliness and preventing isolation, we found a prevailing positive answer. Out of the total number of 66 participants, 61 (92%) responded “yes”. Only one participant, (2%) stated that UTA does not have any impact on the prevention of isolation. Two participants (3%) did not have an opinion, and another two (3%) did not respond.

On the other hand, we are aware of the fact that every person needs to be alone sometimes, that every person enjoys his/her privacy. That is why we were interested to find out, if there are moments in ones’ life when they enjoy to be alone. The results indicate that only two (3%) are not glad to be alone and the other 51 of the questioned (77%) stated that there are moments in their lives when they definitely prefer to be alone. Another 11 (17%) maintain that they are only sometimes pleased to be alone. Two did not respond.

Table 10: Isolation of older people by the society

Isolation of older people from the society	Number of participants	%
Yes	41	62
No	15	23
No comment	8	12
Did not respond	2	3

Table 11: Loneliness

Is loneliness damaging?	Number of participants	%
Yes	9	14
No	43	65
Sometimes	11	17
Did not respond	3	4

These are the reasons the elderly wish to be alone. Rest, self-examination, reminiscing about their lives, evaluation of their actions, listening to music, hobbies, inner meditation, learning, spiritual needs, day-dreaming, serenity, and also because of their health problems. Those that are not seeking to be alone claim to prefer to be in the company of other people and are accustomed to being with other people.

We received the following picture (Table 11) when examining the question if loneliness is damaging. Nine out of sixty-six (14%) are displeased with loneliness since it lowers the ability to communicate, even eliminates the motivation to live. "Loneliness is an empty feeling", one must be in constant contact with the neighborhood, loneliness hurts. One must feel useful, be able to communicate with others. Forty-three participants (65%) claim not to be alarmed, that was proven in our previous questionnaire. Being alone for them is gratifying, it gives them an opportunity to think, plan ones activities, get involved with their hobbies, but for some it is just something that they got accustomed to. Eleven participants (17%) are pleased to be alone occasionally to make difficult decisions.

When we ask ourselves the question "What are the reasons for social isolation of elderly?" we can get many different possibilities for the answer. There are a number of reasons for social isolation:

- ◆ insecurity
- ◆ do not trust people, or their surroundings
- ◆ not willing to adapt to a new environment
- ◆ no desire to be involved, ignorance to social contacts (old and new)
- ◆ lack of possibilities (do not know how, nobody to do it with, nowhere to go, I am short of money)
- ◆ inferiority complex (age, health, lack of education)

The number of elderly is constantly increasing - an ageing population is self-evident in our country. That is why we are obliged to create appropriate conditions for our aging segment of society. A dignified old age should not be out of the ordinary. Changes do occur in our students that take part in our UTA program. By participating in our programs, and other activities, they finally experience affection from their friends and family members. Our program is working.

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STUDIRANJE KAO PREVENCIJA SOCIJALNE IZOLACIJE STARIJIH OSOBA

Nadežda Hrapkova

Sveučilište za treću dob na Sveučilištu Comenius u Bratislavi, Slovačka

***Sažetak** - Članak predstavlja rezultate istraživanja koje je provedeno na Sveučilištu za treću dob u Bratislavi na studentima treće dobi o osjećajima, stavovima, zadovoljstvu i motivaciji za učenje u starijoj dobi. Istraživanje sadrži nalaze o mišljenju o samoći i socijalnoj izolaciji kod starijih studenata. Studijski programi na Sveučilištu za treću dob im pomažu da prihvate nove okolnosti u društvu koje se mijenja i prevladati barijere izolacije i samoće. Aktivno starenje je vrlo važan fenomen koji nije čest u svim društvima i ne prakticiraju ga svi pojedinci.*

***Ključne riječi:** aktivno starenje, osjećaju starijih studenata, motivacija za učenje, kvaliteta života, socijalna izolacija starijih osoba*