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Daily Life of the Oldest Old

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The purpose of this study was to investigate how very old persons—a representative sample of 129 noninstitutionalized 85-year-old Swedish persons with different patterns of adjustment—may live and experience daily life. The analysis of in-depth interviews showed that better adjusted participants enjoyed their freedom as retirees to form daily life at their own choosing. Within patterns of poorer adjustment, daily life was more influenced by other conditions than by the individual's preferences. It was common to construct personal time-tables for keeping up self-control and regardless of the level of activity, most participants thought that time passed quickly. It is argued that older persons' everyday activities, experiences and wishes should be thoroughly investigated and adjusted to when intervention programs for the elderly are planned.

Knowledge of older persons' daily lives may provide a starting point for social and medical interventions. Altergott (1988b) states that a perspective on daily life helps us to understand the well-being of older people in society and that learning about behavior patterns helps us to define constructive measures for enhancing quality of life in later life. In addition, Passuth and Bengtson (1988) argue that research in social gerontology has strayed too far from people's everyday experiences and that research on older people's day-to-day lives is important for the

understanding of phenomena of aging. Studies on daily life have usually employed time budget methods and often only leisure activities have been focused on (Altergott, 1988a; Cowgill & Baulch, 1962; Gordon & Gaitz, 1976; Schmitz-Scherzer, 1976). However, according to Moss and Lawton (1982), the frequency of time devoted to an activity does not necessarily measure the satisfaction or pleasure that is obtained from that activity. In their study on the time use of four different groups of independent and dependent elderly, respondents were asked to rate their appreciation for various activities in which they were engaged.

Daily life of the oldest old (85+) has received little attention. An 85-year-old person has usually been retired for about twenty years and has thus a long experience of creating an individual life style. But this age group is also at greater risk of experiencing physical and mental impairments and loneliness, which will influence daily living.

The typical very old person in Sweden is, like in other Western countries, a widowed woman living in her own home. Women of 80 years and older constitute almost three quarters of the elderly and only 16% are married as compared with 52% of the men in this age group (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1985). Swedish social policy aims at enabling the elderly to remain in their homes and in consequence of this policy, community-based home-help service and housing subsidies have been well developed. Home-help service, for example, encompasses almost half of the oldest old (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1985).

The concept of time needs to be the focus of studies of the daily life of the elderly since the relationship to time is different in old age. Retirees are relieved from obligatory timetables that to a great extent used to shape their daily lives and careers. Now, they may structure time according to their own wishes but this freedom can also make aging problematic. Markson (1973) argues that the old person must be able to replace obligatory timetables with voluntary quasi-timetables and therefore "the ability to use one's social time as one chooses, as a vital part of personality reintegration, is necessary for successful aging" (p. 46).

The purpose of this study was to investigate how 85-year-old persons living in the community spent their days and how daily life was experienced. In order to cover as many aspects as possible of the subject, a qualitative method with in-depth interviews was used. The participants were previously categorized into seven different patterns of adjustment to old age (Carlsson, Berg & Wenestam, in press). To ascertain the heterogeneity of old age (Maddox, 1987; Rowe & Kahn, 1987) the analysis of daily life experiences was made with particular regard to the interviewees' different patterns of adjustment.

Method

Subjects

The participants in this study were recruited from an ongoing health survey (H-70) of 85-year-old persons living in Göteborg, which is the second largest city in Sweden with 500,000 inhabitants (Rinder, Roupe, Steen & Svanborg, 1975). Out of a random sample, 162 persons who lived in their own homes were selected. The number of drop outs in this group amounted to 33 persons and thus 129 persons took part in the study—39 (30%) men and 90 (70%) women.

The sample did not show much variation in social background factors such as education and living conditions. Only 4% of the women but 17% of the men had a high-school certificate or a university degree. Most people lived in apartments in the older central districts of Göteborg. A majority of the subjects had lived in the city for more than 50 years and 73% lived alone. Half of the men and 13% of the women were still married. There were no marked variations in financial situation or income, largely because of the Swedish state pension system and housing subsidies. About half of the participants (54%) showed some degree of impaired mobility, 60% needed help in daily living and 73% of these persons received public home-help service.

No one was excluded from the study due to their physical or mental health status. Among the drop outs six persons felt too weak to participate and another six were excluded by their guardians because of dementia. Five persons declared that they were tired of investigations and five thought that their memory

was not adequate to answer questions. Two had died before contact was made and eight persons did not answer repeated phone calls and letters. One interview was excluded by both the analyst and the co-judge since the answers did not show credibility. Thus 129 persons participated in the study.

Qualitative method

The qualitative method that was used—phenomenography—was developed at the Department of Education and Educational Research at the University of Göteborg. The purpose of the method is to categorize and describe people's different perceptions of a phenomenon by using comparative analysis (Marton, 1981). When qualitative data in the form of in-depth interviews are used, these are analyzed for the characteristics of their meanings concerning specific topics which were the focus of the interview.

All experiences, thoughts and feelings that each person expressed in the interviews were weighed together in the analysis. Each perusal of the transcribed interview is in effect a step further in the researcher's understanding of what the participant wanted to convey, since the understanding reached at the previous perusal was used as background knowledge to be developed further.

The next step in the analysis is to group conceptions that are qualitatively similar and to describe the nature of this similarity. The outcome of this grouping of similar conceptions is a limited number of qualitatively different categories of description, which are characterized by the reduction of the amount of information and their content-specific nature. The qualitative differences between the categories imply that they are sharply delimited from each other as to their characteristics. The categories are then named, described and illustrated with representative quotations from the interviews, which reflect their contents. The total number of interviews then form the base and frame of reference for the total qualitative variation that emerges as a result of the analysis.

The categories of adjustment that constitute the basis for this study on daily life emerged from an analysis of in-depth interviews where the participants were asked to describe their daily

lives, themselves, their family lives, satisfaction with their past, wishes for the future and present pleasures. The interviews that took place in the participants' homes were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The comparative analysis of these interviews revealed seven qualitatively different categories of adjustment reflecting how old age was experienced and adjusted to (Carlsson et al., in press).

Reliability

In order to test the reliability of the categories they were examined by a cojudge, who had access to the descriptions of the categories and to the interviews but no information about which category the different interviews belonged to. The cojudge's task was to categorize the interviews with the guidance of the descriptions of the categories. When the categorizations of both judges were compared, the first and the second judge agreed in 105 cases (out of 129), which means a simple interjudge reliability measure of 0.82. A correction for chance (Cohen, 1960) reduces the reliability somewhat to 0.77. The cojudgement thus implies possible overlapping between the categories.

Daily life

For this study an analysis of the in-depth interviews was performed with particular regard to how the participants lived and experienced their daily lives. The participants were asked to describe an ordinary day, a good day, a bad day, what they wished the days to be like and whether it was difficult to make time pass. The results from the analysis are presented for each category of adjustment with representative quotations from the interviews. Each description thus covers all the variations within its category in living and experiencing daily life as were expressed in the interviews.

Categories of adjustment

The seven categories of adjustment are ranked from positive to negative experiences and adjustments to old age as judged by the author: Category A. *Self-Realizing* (7 persons: 2 men, 5 women), to whom old age was perhaps the most meaningful and enjoyable period in their lives—now they had the time to

read, to reflect and to help other people. The participants in Category B. *Mature Aging* (16 persons: 7 men, 9 women), took great pleasure in their varying and more practical activities and saw old age as a natural ending of a good life. Category C. *Adapting* (35 persons: 10 men, 25 women), were quite dissatisfied with their lives but they felt they could influence their present situation and thus they could sustain their integrity. Category D. *Dependent* (18 persons: 2 men, 16 women), were strongly dependent on their families—they made life worth living. Category E. *Resignedly Accepting* (33 persons: 12 men, 21 women), experienced their present lives as tedious and filled with losses. To themselves they tried to accept their situation but in a passive and resigned way. Category F. *Despairing* (13 persons: 3 men, 10 women), felt helpless, superfluous or humiliated and had great difficulties in adjusting and they reacted with open despair. Category G. *Withdrawing* (7 persons: 3 men, 4 women), had withdrawn into a world of their own where they were not disturbed by their surroundings. They were very fixed on the past and due to mental incapacities they experienced life as fragmentary.

There were no gender differences in adjustment to old age. Reduced mobility and need of help was least common in the two first categories but the variability within the latter categories was substantial.

Results

A. *Self-Realizing*

The Self-Realizing made long and detailed accounts of their daily lives with accurate statements of time. The mornings were devoted to reading the newspaper thoroughly and to listening to news or morning service on the radio. The rest of the day was often filled with activities that they found meaningful and often involved contact with other people. Often they helped others both practically and emotionally. One woman visited lonely old people in nursing homes, one gave emotional support via her church and one woman did the laundry for her daughter's family and looked after their sheep. However, the Self-Realizing

also made sure they got time for their own interests and pleasures, which above all was reading for hours. The interviews made evident that they fully enjoyed their daily lives despite any physical constraints and all thought that time passed much too quickly.

(Mr. O. is a retired teacher in quite good health. He lives with his wife in a house of their own and has two sons).

I usually go out to get the newspaper at half past four and I fetch our neighbors' too since they also are rather old and not so well. Then I go to bed again and give half of the paper to my wife. . . . Well, then various things take place. Yesterday, for example, I went to my sister and brought some talking books with me and I took some of her bills to the bank. After that I went back to her, we had coffee together and I helped her to put up some curtain. I went home to eat at two o'clock and then I went for a walk to the cemetery and took the tram home. I had planned to do some gardening in the afternoon but my son phoned to say he would come over so I sat down to read instead. When he came we talked for a couple of hours till it was time for the news on TV. Then I went to bed upstairs to read a book. I borrow quite a lot of books at the library. . . . This spring I have been retired for 23 years, it has been 23 fantastic years that have filled me with. . . . Before I could not imagine what it could be like. It has been quite fantastic because I have had so much to do all the time.

B. Mature Aging

After breakfast and reading the newspaper many of the Mature Agers started to tidy up their homes and then a variety of activities followed. Usually the days were structured so that certain occupations were performed at certain times. The Mature Agers were most conscious of the importance of physical exercises and went for long walks. Many had some special interests that took up much of their time like: gardening, dancing, birdwatching, reading, chess or economy and some belonged to different clubs. Interaction with family and friends was frequent, particularly with the children, but few mentioned that they helped others. In the evenings they watched TV and were usually selective regarding the programs. These interviews reflect intensity, an open mind and satisfaction with life and the days were experienced as being too short.

(Mr. T. used to be the managing director of his own firm and has been a widower for the last ten years. Two of his children live near by but one son is living abroad).

Well, the newspaper comes about half past five and then I do some exercises and have a cup of coffee and a bisquit. I study economy for about two hours till it is time to go for a walk with one of my friends. At half past one I do not want to be disturbed because then comes the report from the stock exchange (on the radio). At two o'clock I get up and do some exercises. . . . When it is gets close to half past four I start to prepare dinner. I enjoy good and proper food, I am very careful about that. I read the papers for a while and watch the news or some interesting lecture on TV or I read a book. The evening passes like this and perhaps I go for a walk around the block. I have some prostate problems so occasionally I will have to get up in the night at about three and then I try to make myself comfortable and go to sleep again. Then the paper comes at half past five and we have been round the clock and I am feeling quite well.

C. Adapting

Daily life of the Adapting was less active and circumstances like the weather, health and contact with other people often influenced how the days were experienced. Their days were quite alike and everyday activities like doing housework took up much time and energy. The rest of the days were filled with mostly indoor activities like knitting, sewing, reading, doing cross-words, baking and TV watching or they went for short walks. Contact with others was mainly upheld via frequent phonecalls. Thanks to their ability to keep themselves busy with occupations that they enjoyed they were, however, quite content with their present lives and with themselves.

(Mrs. A's husband has been dead for five years and she has no children, her only relative is a nephew but she has got several friends. She suffers from asthma and was recently told by her doctor that she has a malignant illness).

If I feel well and have my breakfast and then read my newspaper then I can go out for a while and take a walk. Well, it depends on the weather if I want to go out or not. I like to go out and move about a little if I can and fortunately I usually can do that. Then I cook some food and I don't know exactly what I can tell about the

days but I am mostly at home and in the evenings I watch something that interests me on the TV. Sometimes I play patience if I am tired and so the day passes. I speak quite a lot on the phone, yes I do that because I have many.

D. Dependent

The interviews with the Dependent reflect the importance of contact with their families. With an exception for the two married men in this category, it was only when a child, grandchild or a sibling came to visit or made a phone call that the day was brightened up and feelings of loneliness were alleviated. Also, the Dependent usually had close and frequent contact with their families. Only a few could go out without help and on a fine day they suffered deeply from not being able to go outside. Several said they "did nothing" during the days while others tried to fill their time with some home making, sewing or knitting, reading magazines or watching TV.

(Mrs. H is twice divorced and she had brought up three children mostly on her own. A collum fracture some years ago made her less mobile and recently she got a pace-maker).

Yes, I must say that it is a good day when my home help comes in the morning and makes my bed and makes my coffee. Now I can do it myself but not some time ago. Then she tidies up here and does some errands. She comes in the afternoon too and that makes it twice a day. I think that is very good, I am satisfied with that. I have been so tired for a long time. Of course I walk here to and fro with my stick and out in the corridor too but I get tired and then I lie down and read—my daughters bring me magazines. . . . I only wish I could get out and sit on the benches. When I sit here alone and it is raining then I get depressed, I almost want to cry but I'm really happy when my youngest daughter and her husband come to see me. They have been shopping for me and cook dinner and they tell me to go and rest till the food is ready. Dinner is served, he says and then they will stay for a couple of hours and that day I think is wonderful.

E. Resignedly Accepting

The Resignedly Accepting preferred to talk about what they used to do when they were more fit or what they would do if they felt better instead of telling about their present daily

life. Having realized that the present failed to correspond with the past or with their wishes they tried to accept this by being grateful that they could manage the way they did, despite their need for much home help. Due to pain, impaired sight or walking problems they were usually housebound and daily life was quite monotonous. The day usually started with reading the newspaper then they tried to perform some household tasks. They rested a lot, read some and ended the day in front of the TV.

(Mrs. P. is a severely handicapped woman living alone in a flat designed for disabled persons. Her husband died fourty years ago. She used to work as a home helper and now she recieves home help almost daily. Her two daughters live near and visit her each week).

As a rule I get up between five and six in the morning and then it takes a long time to make a cup of coffee and sandwiches and to get washed and dressed. To get dressed takes a very long time, sometimes an hour. Just to button my clothes takes a long time and this has happened during the last six months. Before it went so quickly and I never had to think about it. Then I read the paper and cook some food and keep myself busy. My home help always comes in the morning and gives me my eye drops and there is always something I must do. At about eleven or half past twelve I've got nothing to do and in the afternoon I lie down. I take off my shoes and lie in bed to rest my legs for one or even two hours. Of course I have moments when I am depressed but I don't show it to anybody. I watch the TV but I don't like the foreign films since I don't know any languages and there is so much violence on the TV so I listen to the news and that's it. So I walk around here in my flat and sit down to read a paper and so on.

F. Despairing

Daily life of the Despairing was experienced as trying or meaningless. It was only in this category that the majority thought the days were too long. Most could manage housework, although with difficulty, and could go for short walks. However, the contrast between what they were able to do some years ago and what they could do now was too great and made them feel useless. Only a few did something apart from everyday activities. Occasionally, they more or less forced themselves

to go for a walk or even attend club meetings but it did not give them any pleasure. As to social contacts, the Despairing showed great heterogeneity: Some were almost totally isolated while others had frequent contact with above all their children. These contacts could, however, not alleviate their feelings of loneliness and unhappiness.

(Mrs. C. has been a widow since forty years, she is childless and lives in a big flat at the center of the town).

It is hard to put my thoughts into words but it is a good day if I can find somebody who can take me for a walk so that I can come out. Well, nobody calls me and nobody comes and I walk here up and down and yes, I feel shut in. Then I try to go out on my own but that is not a good walk. Things are not always easy when I walk about here like a lost soul. I am so restless that I can't sit or lie down but I walk about and that's rather dismal. . . . Before I used to devour books but now I cannot see the text any more.

G. *Withdrawing*

Due to mental impairments, the Withdrawing had difficulties in accounting for their daily activities. But being allowed much time for answering, the interviews made clear that they rested most of the day and that they needed much help to cope with daily living. They often let their thoughts wander back to their childhood or earlier adulthood and they were inclined to mix the past together with the present. Some thought, for example, that their dead spouses were still alive. Their wishes were quite modest: Some wished they could go out for a walk and one woman wished she had a better character so that she at least could do something during the day. One severely demented woman's answer to almost all questions was that she wished she had more contact with people.

(Mr. F. lives with his wife in a small flat outside town. He is a retired driver, has got one daughter and is in good physical health)

Well, when I have done my obligations, then I sit here and make myself comfortable. Yes, then I sit here and enjoy myself. I read the newspaper and most of all I sit here and dream. I have got memories from when I was four years old, events that I can remember clearly. I remember my father when I was with him, we sailed he and I. . .

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how daily life may be lived and experienced in very old age. A qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews revealed great differences in life styles and experiences among the 85-year old participants, which support the demand for a more heterogenous view of the elderly (Maddox, 1987; Rowe & Kahn, 1987). We found that daily life in very old age could be most active, enjoyable and meaningful. At the other extreme, it could also be experienced as monotonous or meaningless. The diversity that stood out in this study could be attributed to the fact that in-depth interviews were used, which allowed the participants to talk freely about all aspects of their daily lives, or that different patterns of adjustment were examined.

The meaningfulness that was experienced among the Self-Realizing and Mature Aging may actually be due to the participants' advanced age. These persons enjoyed a daily life style of their own choosing without any external demands on how to live. The lack of expectations on the the elderly—"the role-less role" (Rosow, 1974)—needs thus not be negatively experienced as is a common perception.

In contrast to the full life of the participants in the former categories, daily life in the later ones was experienced as increasingly monotonous, meaningless or too complex. These participants showed by their way of reasoning how a declining ability to influence daily life might lead to resignation, despair or withdrawal into a private world of thoughts.

Relationship to time appears to have an important meaning in very old age. Despite the variations in daily living, some consistant patterns with regard to daily scheduling and perception of the passage of time stood out in all categories. Time was generally experienced as passing quickly, regardless of the level of activity. This agrees with previous findings that the elderly perceive a swifter passing of time than younger persons (Kastenbaum, 1966; Wallach & Green, 1961). According to these authors the limited time perspective of older persons (much time has been used up and little remains) causes them to feel an increased value and intensity of time (Kastenbaum, 1966; Wallach & Green, 1961). The experience of time as having a

great value in old age contrasts, however, to the low value that society attaches to the time of the elderly.

Structuring of the days meant that certain tasks were to be performed at certain hours and it was often so carefully done that we have labelled it *ritualization* (Carlsson et al., in press). This procedure helped to sustain self-control, a strong predictor of psychological and physical well-being (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987), for performing activities of daily living and consequently also integrity and autonomy. Therefore, housework may have a value of its own and moreover, it can help to reduce the leisure time that has to be filled somehow. Those who ritualized their days had thus constructed personal time tables, which Markson (1973) claims to be important for successful aging. Daily schedules also proved to be most common in the categories of better adjustment to old age. However, daily routines, and thereby autonomy, might easily be disrupted by sudden changes in scheduled helping hours, for example. This is an actual risk in Sweden, where almost fifty percent of the oldest old receive public home help (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, 1985).

An additional finding in this study was the three distinct time-patterns regarding relationships to time. In the first categories the participants lived very much in the present and made good use of their time. In the middle categories time was deliberately filled up to make it pass, while in the later ones the past was most important and present time was merely passing by. Time-budget studies demonstrate that elderly people generally spend the larger part of the day in their homes, which thus is the location for most activities. Moss and Lawton (1982) found in their study on four groups with different degrees of dependency, that 75–85% of the day was spent at home, obligatory activities occupied 27–34%, television watching 20–23%, rest and relaxation 12–20%; much of the waking day (59–66%) was spent alone. Older women (75+) have been found to spend twice as much time alone (8 hours a day) as men, which mainly is due to the overrepresentation of widows in this age group (Altergott, 1988c). As to outdoor activities of very old individuals, Swedish investigations show that 30% of persons 80–84 years went for walks several times per week and weekly gardening was done

by 20% (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1985). In this study it was apparent that getting out was a major concern, besides meeting other people, for experiencing a good day. To be able to get out of doors was not self-evident any longer and therefore, when it could be done it implied deeper meanings of physical well-being and achievement, of being part of life and of recognizing and being recognized by people in the neighborhood.

Regarding generalization of the results, the study shows conditions that could make them applicable to other groups of especially very old persons; the study population was a representative sample of 85-year-old persons living in their own homes in the city of Göteborg. There were 129 participants (which is considered a large number in qualitative studies) and reliability of the categories of adjustment was examined by a cojudge. Moreover, several of these categories corresponded to the patterns of adjustment that were discovered by Neugarten, Havighurst and Tobin (1968). Thus, it may be concluded that the findings of this study could apply to the oldest old living in the city of Göteborg. And since the Swedish population of very old persons is quite homogenous in income, educational backgrounds, access to public home help services, transportation and medical care, the results may be valid also for other oldest olds in Sweden.

The most conspicuous finding in this study was that even very old persons construct personal time tables for the purposes of maintaining control, independence and for experiencing a swifter passage of time. Consequently, when older persons need care and support in their homes, either from the community or family caregivers, it is important to find out how their possible time tables are constructed and to adjust caring interventions to them. On the other hand persons, who do not structure their daily activities, may need assistance to do so in order to enhance their autonomy.

The different ways of adjusting to daily life that are described in this study require diverse ways of approaching the elderly and clearly speak against stereotyped thinking in both research and in care planning. In order to develop home care programs that are better adjusted to how older individuals use their time, it might be suggested that in-depth interviews could

be used (also for demented persons) as a starting-point for interventions. However it needs to be observed that caregivers of the elderly usually belong to younger generations with higher materialistic demands and obligatory structured time and thus have different relationships to time. Therefore, we argue that educational programs should include teaching in time perspective with special emphasis on that of the elderly. This will help to promote an understanding of how older individuals value and use their time and how these issues are related to autonomy and well-being. Regarding further research on the daily life of the elderly, it would moreover be interesting to perform combined quantitative/qualitative studies for comparing how actual use of daily time correspond to subjective experiences of daily living.

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