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Seniors as family resources from perspective of people in early and medium adulthood

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Abstract

The resources of the family are usually analyzed in the context of the resources which the family has as a system, this pays special attention to the strengths of the parents. The discussion in this area is a paucity of content related to seniors, which are also members of the family. The potential of the elderly, which can also be seen as family resources, can't be overestimated in many difficult situations, and especially in a crisis that plagued the modern family. Around these issues are focused reflections included in this text. The article contains the results of empirical research on seniors as family resources conducted among people who are in the early and middle adulthood.

Introductory remarks

The elderly living in Poland have, according to many studies, usually very good or good relationships with family, based on mutual assistance of all family members. Along with the increasing age of the older person the nature of the exchange alter. Initially, the older people provide more for the younger members of the family, later (especially after 80 years old) they need more support from the younger generations (Szatur-Jaworska 2012, pp. 419–448; Czekanowski, 2002, pp. 140–172). However, regardless of age, an older person may be an invaluable resource family.

In the social sciences, especially in the sciences of education, family resources are usually analysed in the context of the resources that family possess as a system, including special attention to the strengths of parents. In discussions concerning this

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area there is noticeable paucity of content related to seniors, who are also members of the family. The potential of the elderly, which can also be seen as resources of the family, can not to be overestimated in many difficult situations, especially in a crisis, which are the scourge of the modern family. Reflections included in this text will focus around these issues.

The resources of the family, their origin and components as the basic conditions for the formulation of own research methodological assumptions

According to Stanisław Kawula “the resources and capabilities of the family are potential, which the family has when dealing with a crisis situation” (Kawula 2002, p. 507). There are three potential sources of family resources: 1) the personal resources of family members; 2) the resources of the family system; 3) the resources of the community, in which family is located. Among the personal resources in a situation of crisis that might help overcome it are: intelligence, knowledge and skills, personality traits, health, sense of control over their own lives, their own sense of values, empathy (Kawula 2002, p. 507).

The family resource system includes, among others: family integrity (expressed in mutual trust, appreciation, support, integration and respect individuality); adaptability of the family (a family's ability to overcome difficulties); family organization (this is compatibility, clarity and consequences in terms of the applicable roles and rules and clear delimitation of family and generational boundaries); family communication (including clarity and directness of communication, which relieves tension and helps resolve conflicts); the strength of the family (a sense of control over events, including an active attitude towards the difficult situation and the conviction that change will bring, good effects); the integration and stability of the family (measured in the quantity and form of the time spent together, including within the framework of family traditions); the ability to use individual resources (the family as a whole may derive from the individual resources of individual family members to deal with crisis situations and stress management); the flexibility of the family (the extent to which the family is able to make changes in the system, for example, change the rules, boundaries, roles played in the family) (Kawula 2002, pp. 507–509).

Seniors as family resources – empirical exemplification

For this study the author of the text conducted empirical research titled Seniors as family resources in April 2015. Purpose of the study was to improve knowledge about the elderly seen as family resources from the perspective of the people who are in the early and middle adulthood. The object of the study were the resources of the family, reflected in the older family members, analysed from the perspective of people who are in the early and middle adulthood. The subjects of research were people who

are in the early and middle adulthood and are considering the elderly members of the family as their resources. The main research problem comes down to answer to the question: How are the elderly resources of the family seen from the perspective of the people who are in the early and middle adulthood? Specific research issues were: How can seniors help family members in a crisis or difficult situation and what resources do they use for this purpose? How do older people contribute to the cohesion of the family, family organization, communication, as well as the integration and stability of the family?

In regard to the aim and object of research and formulated research issues, in empirical studies used qualitative research strategy, and thematic biography as the test method. Research technique was the analysis of the test, in particular content analysis of written statements of people who are in the early and middle adulthood. The empirical material, consisting of eleven statements, comparative analysis, using qualitative content analysis.

Participation in the research was voluntary, respondents were provided with anonymity and they gave their consent to the publication of their statements. The author has made the selection of the targeted respondents by asking to fill in a research tool in the early and middle adulthood (and more specifically familiar students of pedagogy and research workers of one University located in the province of Warmia and Mazury and familiar people who do not work at the University and who have higher education), which perceive among the family members older people (i.e. aged 60 years old and above), who are according to them resource of the family. Studied the views of people who are in these stages of life, because they already have certain baggage of life experience, know how to analyse the process of family life and appreciate the contribution of the older generations in their development and family life. You can say – as it scientists analysing adulthood – that their «cognitive processes are generally richer and fuller» (Jankowski, 2007, p. 37). In conclusion, the essential criteria for the selection of the sample of the research were the following: 1) perception among family members of seniors representing the resource; 2) age (early or average adulthood); 3) student of pedagogy or person with higher education. Interviewees were given a research tool titled Instructions for written statement about seniors as resources of the family, consisting of several open questions, which refer to the seniors, who are members of their families. Author recommended them to choose such older people whose resources are used in difficult situations and crisis. At the outset of a research author tool explained them the term «resources of the family».

Eleven people decided to fill the research tool: person no. 1 (the woman at the age of 27, she wrote about grandfather, who at the time of his death in 2013 was 84 years, grandmother, who at the time of her death in 2012 was 76 years, father at the age of 63 years, mother at the age of 60 years, father in law aged 71 years); person no. 2 (the women at the age of 37, she wrote about mother at the age of 67 years, mother in law aged 60 years); person no. 3 (the woman at the age of 39 years, she wrote about her

grandmother, who had 95 years and mother at the age of 65 years); person no. 4 (the woman at the age of 44 years, wrote about father at the age of 78 years); person no. 5 (the women in the age of 22, she wrote about grandfather at the age of 69 years and grandmother at the age of 72 years); person no. 6 (the woman at the age of 23, she wrote about uncle at the age of 65 years); person no. 7 (the women in the age of 22, she wrote about her grandmother at the age of 71 years old); person no. 8 (the women in the age of 24, she wrote about her grandmother at the age of 66 years and grandfather at the age of 72 years); person no. 9 (the woman at the age of 22, she wrote about her grandmother at the age of 72 years); person no. 10 (the woman at the age of 22, she wrote about her grandmother at the age of 80); person no. 11 (the women aged 39 years wrote about mother and father at the age of 79 years).

In the first part of the research tool asked respondents about How help the elderly members of their family in overcoming crisis and/or difficult situations and what resources do they use for this purpose? In addition, given the examples of the resources to which they can connect to. Respondents also had the opportunity of adding their own answers. At the same time they were asked about the broader rationale and selection, which the older person in the family is affected.

All respondents referred to the category "life experience, the wisdom of life". From written statements, it appears that seniors can help their family members, using their life experience, wisdom of life, especially in difficult situations for professional affairs, and human relationships. But the elderly do not impose their opinion, only serve as council. Here are some of the statements on this topic: *Yes, all younger family members (children, son in law, grandchildren) benefit from the experience of life of senior citizens (mother, grandmother, mother in law). This is the most complex problem situation (cases, conflicts between people) (person no. 2); When I have a problem, or anyone in the family and does not know how to solve it, thanks to grandmother's wisdom and experience, she always tell us what she thinks and what she has done, but never impose on others (person no. 10).*

Another senior resource, on which subjects (11 people) pointed was the intelligence (in this emotional intelligence). Sample statement on this issue: *Yes, younger family members (children, son in law, grandchildren) when easily need a hint, how to solve the problem, grandchildren with homework. Important is also emotional intelligence you have seniors in my family, greatly facilitating the mutual daily family life (person no. 2).*

A lot of indications (9 people) were also related to knowledge of seniors, including knowledge of life (as a mother and a woman), used in solving problems and crises (very often with grandchildren's homework, treat the sick members of the family, in solving crossword puzzles). Respondents wrote: *Yes, younger family members (children, son in law, grandchildren) when easily need a hint, how to solve the problem, grandchildren with their homework. Provide an ideal source of knowledge when solving crossword puzzles and games (person no. 2); I have benefited from my grandfather's*

knowledge while I was attending middle school and technical school of economics, because grandpa has a broad understanding of our economy and market. With my grandmother I can talk about life dilemmas and draw from her expertise as a mother and a woman (person no. 8); Me and my cousins benefited from my grandmother's knowledge, for example when we did homework (as children), granny was always helpful and knowledgeable (person no. 9).

All people participating in the study mentioned the skills of senior citizens, which are rather used in everyday life and problematic situations, and not typical crises. Woman statements were dominated by culinary skills, taking on knitting, embroidery and darning, and in men's case it was the repair skills, carpentry and garden crops. There were also skills related to previously executed profession (pedagogical, economical). Here are the most characteristic expressions: *Yes, younger family members (children, son in law, grandchildren), especially when performing domestic work and work in the garden, sewing, cooking and art work and artistic classes (person no. 2); My dad has a high pedagogical skills that help me in shaping of my son's character (person no. 4).*

Almost all subjects (10 people) pointed to the personality traits of older people, among which the most often mentioned: sense of humour, optimism and positive attitude to life. Here are the sample statements: *Dad – to unwind, jokes a lot, clowning around, is cheerful, people like to be around him; Grandma was a very warm person, she liked to joke, she was funny, she liked when people felt good in her presence and the atmosphere was nice and relaxed (person no. 1); Grandmother, despite her age, has a great sense of humour, can make anyone laugh, is also optimistic to life which helps her children, grandchildren in overcoming difficulties (person no. 10).*

Many respondents (10 people) believed that seniors, which they write about, have a sense of self-worth, and several of them said that their close older people have also helped to increase their sense of values. Some of the statements on that matter: *Yes, children and grandchildren watching confident seniors, believe that they may also be the same, which makes it easier for them to take challenges and objectives (person no. 2); Grandma always knows that anyone can count and rely on her. She is glad that she can help others, so a sense of her own value is strongly increased (person no. 10).*

Subjects (6 persons) has referred also to the issue of a sense of control over their own lives, indicating that senior citizens, which they wrote about possess. One person stated that this is visible when making decision about retirement. Two people have added that this is something they have learned from seniors. Example of a response: *parents despite disability are self-reliant, independent, mom still works (person no. 1).*

Subjects (7 people) indicated empathy as a resource of their seniors. Thanks to senior's empathy, family members understand each other better which helps in resolving tough, conflict situations. Two people claimed that they have learned empathy from their grandmothers. Selected statements: *My grandmother and my mother can very well empathize with my situation and find a remedy to my worries (person no.*

3); *He can back me up when he knows I am right while parents think otherwise* (person no. 6); *Grandma really empathizes with the problems of the whole family, experiencing everything together with family members* (person no. 10).

Nine people wrote about state of physical and mental health of senior citizens as a resource. Although seniors, of which subjects mentioned, do not have the best physical health, they can help in difficult situations, to support mentally, to deal with small children in the family and other family members requiring care. The subjects wrote: *Mom and dad, despite many physical disorders and disability, are fit mentally and self-sufficient. Both dad and mom, can take the train and come to take care of their grandchildren, or bring a thing* (person no. 1); *My dad, despite health problems, shows everyone how you can be a human being in any situation, someone that you want to spend time with* (person no. 4).

Only two subjects mentioned the other resources: *Grandparents also assist us in material matters. As I mentioned, my mom alone keeps the household (detached). In moments of crisis, grandparents are always in a hurry with the help* (person no. 5); *For example free time, financial* (person no. 11).

The second part of the research tool consisted of questions with several points, the first detailed question took the following form: "Do the older members of your family contribute to mutual trust, appreciation, support, integration of the family and respect for the individuality of family members? (If they do, How does it manifests itself?)". All interviewees answered affirmatively to the question, stressing that seniors can help in solving problems and family conflicts, bind family, care about integration through joint leisure activities, events and family celebrations. Here are some of the statements in this issue: *Yes, it manifests itself in everyday life situations, family integration by organizing joint leisure activities, preparation and sharing the meals, joint talk* (person 2); *A mutually trust, appreciation, support, integration and respect for the most important values that are passed from generation to generation* (person no. 6).

The next question was as follows: "Do the older members of your family contribute to compliance, clarity and consistency in terms of the existing roles and rules and a clear designation of family and generational boundaries? (If they do, How does it manifests itself?)". Most of the surveyed responded affirmatively (6 persons), two negatively, three not commented on this topic. The data show that seniors do not impose standards, does not interfere with without the explicit request. They usually just suggest and advise. Example of a statement: *Yes, they guard fulfilment of elementary roles assigned to each member of the family, consent. They do not interfere without explicit request in the family affairs of the younger generation* (person no. 2).

On another question: "Do the older members of your family contribute to better communication in the family, which discharged and helps resolve conflicts? (If they do, How does it manifests itself?)", almost all people tested (10 persons) replied af-

firmatively, noting that seniors contribute to better communication in the family, and that good spirit is major helper along with sense of humour, positive attitude and the ability to select right words as well as tolerance. Interviewees spoke about this in the following way: *mom – is able to choose the right words, calm others down and look for the positive aspects and mitigate, when it comes to some misunderstandings, or understatements* (person no. 1); *Granny takes care of the good contacts between members. Always trying to listen to both sides and leads the conversation, trying to resolve the conflict* (person no. 8).

The next question was: “Do the older members of your family contribute to increasing the quantity and form of the time spent together (including maintaining family traditions)? (If they do, How does it manifests itself?)” All people have responded affirmatively, adding that seniors care about common leisure, meeting during the meals (if they live together, then during the day, if not, during Sunday lunches) and the joint celebration of the holidays. Here are some statements: *Traditionally the whole family spent Christmas Eve at Grandma, she would always ensure that family spent as much time together as possible during holidays* (person no. 7); *My family is large, we spend a lot of the time together. Two times a day we drink coffee together, go for walks in the woods or on the bike rides. We put great emphasis to the tradition of Christmas, we nurture them* (person no. 8); *Grandma often organizes public holidays at home or various types of gatherings, where the whole family meet* (person 10).

On another question: “Do the older members of your family contribute to maintain close relationships in the family? (If they do, How does it manifests itself?)”, all answered affirmatively, noting that often meetings have big impact on close relationships (during meals, shared outings) and leisure time. Sample statement on this subject: *Granny organizes family dinners, which whole family tries to attend, we talk a lot with each other and we spend our time together* (person no. 7).

The last question was: “Do the older members of your family contribute to take joint actions? (If they do, How does it manifests itself?)”. The seven surveyed confirmed that together with seniors take joint actions (as joint leisure, and preparing and eating). One person has denied, and the others did not respond to it. Here are sample expressions: *Family gatherings, I prepare salads and such, they provide the place and atmosphere* (person no. 3); *Jointly organized events: birthdays, name days, christenings, etc.* (person no. 7); *We share walks and prepare meals* (person no. 9).

The three tested wrote additional reflections that show how important seniors are in their family and what a great resource they are: *Seniors in my family are an invaluable resource. You can always count on them, support, help with grandchildren. Their life wisdom and gentle way of being cause the continuous desire to reside with them and spend every free moment* (person 2); *Resources, people with experience are invaluable because of their experience, the young generation will never have the same experience as our elders, fighting for themselves and family in times of war and com-*

munism, our times generate people focused on themselves, selfish, fighting for survival at any cost but with wrong motives (person no. 3); I wouldn't change my family and my elders nor would I give them to any institution. They taught me about values, respect and dignity, they are my role models (person no. 6).

Summary and final notes

It should be noted that the results of research presented in the article are very optimistic, because of the selection of the research sample. Participants in the study are people in the early and middle adulthood (studying pedagogy or with higher education), recognizing senior members of their families as its resource. The test results are therefore not representative and only apply to people who took part in them.

According to the analysis of written statements, respondents grew up in environments which are a kind of intergenerational community in which there are strong ties between the representatives of the older and younger generations, and primarily uses the resources of the older members of the family in a difficult situation or crisis. Seniors in the families of people who have agreed to participate, are invaluable resources of the family. Elderly people occupy high position in these families, they are often so-called "the head of the family", integrating family environment, they pass traditions and values (family, a good man), showing how you can solve problems and overcome crises.

From the conducted studies, this is potential that lies in elderly as family resources: 1) life experience (the wisdom of life), which is used in many difficult situations, in particular in crisis situations; 2) knowledge (among others historical, associated with traditions and rituals, life) and skills (including professional and social); 3) mature attitude (to the tasks of life, are taking the roles of transience of human life); 4) having time for family; 5) holding a multi-dimensional social support for all generations in the family; 6) taking action on family cohesion and organization of the family, as well as proper communication in the family, and for the integration and stability of the family (through by example conversations and meetings organizations).

Studies empower to one main postulate to the formulation of models and support patterns in practical activities to support the family, take into account the potential of senior citizens. Both theory and pedagogical practice, should not belittle the vast resources of the older family members.

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