

Occupational Activity as a Resource of Psychological Balance in Old Age



Teodor Gergov*

Department of Psychology, South-west University "Neophyte Rilski" - Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

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***Corresponding author:** Teodor Gergov, Department of Psychology, South-west University "Neophyte Rilski" - Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

Abstract

Old age is supposedly the most neglected psychological period from a scientific point of view. This article aims to explore the influence of occupational activity in old age on basic psychological phenomena. It focuses on its ability to influence, stabilize and postpone the psychological changes typical of old age. To this end, a number of research papers done by authors working in this field were studied. An extensive analysis of the literary sources dedicated to this topic from the past few decades has been made. Articles, studies and books were read, checked and juxtaposed by hand, all concerning the role of occupational activity for the psychological functioning of old people. A search by key words and key phrases in the specialized databases was done. The information collected was interpreted and structured by meaning and topics.

The analysis that was done outlines some tendencies expected from the very beginning. To remain active in life contributes to the preservation of psychological balance in the ageing people. Having an occupation means that the old person can make full use of his or her repertoire of roles, as well as to satisfy his or her basic and more complex needs. Self-evaluation, self-concept, and emotional balance are positively influenced. The feeling of usefulness, reduction of loneliness and psychological well-being are also positively affected.

Keywords: Occupational Activity; Old Age; Activity; Psychological Functioning; Psychological Balance

Introduction

Activity reflects the functions of a person in the process of interaction with their surroundings. The psychological image of the person is formed in the process of this activity [1]. S. Rubinstein points out that "the study of the psychological side of the activity is nothing but the study of the personality's psychology while doing the activity" [2]. Activity is discussed as a crucial factor for psychological development and as a medium to influence the mind. The forms and ways of expressing oneself in an activity characterize personality [3].

Review

Labour is a basic form of conscious and transformational activity. When people work, they influence the environment and, concurrently, they change their own nature. The practical interaction of a personality with their surroundings is an important condition to transform the external into internal. This is due to the fact that during an activity the external influences are interpreted by means of internal schemas. These internal schemas constitute the psychological characteristics of personality: individual qualities and skills, knowledge and competence levels, habits, orientation, life experience, etc. It's generally accepted that labour has played a key role, in

a phylogenetic aspect, in the formation and development of the human psyche. The beneficial influence of occupational activities on personality development and its ability to evoke positive psychological states is enormous [4]. Indicative of this is the stated by Locke fact that only up to 1983 there have been published more than 3350 empirical studies, articles, studies and theoretical sections, all dedicated to job satisfaction.

Labour as a psychological process falls into the category of the conscious and focused activities, the practicing of which changes the psychological state of the laborer [5]. "A personality's qualities are formed and developed namely during the occupational activity" [4]. Labour is the main field of activity in life, a resource of social benefits and vital energy. N. Koleva points out that labour turns out to be a great factor, a main creative and forming power that controls the development, the mind and the consciousness of a person, Koleva (1988). Labour is among the main instruments for social accomplishment and for the fulfilment of a person's energy and creative abilities. It boasts a number of social functions – it defines a person's place in the social structure, his social prestige and the awareness of being useful. Related to the time-span of each individual's life, this presupposes preservation of the key role of labour in

all stages of the ontogenesis, including old age. Therefore, the orientation towards labour based on our values is a relatively stable personal disposition that defines the general orientation of social activity. To the old man, labour is a form of active adaptation to the new realities of life and a condition for physical and mental health [6].

Having an occupation can be regarded as an important factor for the psychological balance of the ageing person. The psychological side of its influence could be interpreted as achieving personal satisfaction, experiencing an achievement, being useful to oneself and to one's relatives, self-respect, identification to a working group, social prestige, and others [7]. The aspects of labour related to values are connected with the contents and the hierarchy of the needs that it satisfies. The importance of these aspects is understood best after a long period of inactivity from work or when work cannot be done any more. There is a noticeable correlation between the system of values that pensioners have and their practical involvement in occupational and social activities. The preservation of an active stance in life correlates with their expressed wish to practice some sort of occupation or social activity [8]. Therefore, the question what drives some pensioners to continue working is more of a rhetorical one. Just as the people from the other age periods have their needs, so do the people belonging to the old age's group. The fulfilment of the needs automatically transforms them in reasons for doing some work activities. Needs express the attitude of a person towards reality, and this attitude is selective [3]. When it all boils down to the old person's personality, this means that he is more or less free to choose a strategy for life. Practicing some sort of work would allow this person to satisfy more fully his or her basic needs as well as more complex ones.

From a social-economic standpoint, the standard of living decreases drastically following retirement, which is the main reason to remain at work or to return to doing a job in society. The results from a research among Bulgarian pensioners support this statement and reveal that the most common reason to continue working is the wish to improve your own material status of living or that of your relatives [9]. The social nature of a person does not allow him or her to stop contributing to the benefit of others, not until a person has enough strength. The results from another research on the motivation of people to work following their retirement also confirm this, showing that 76.61% of the surveyed people want to provide material and moral support for their children and relatives. Only an insignificant percentage of the surveyed claim they have decided to have a well-deserved rest after a long and difficult life of work [10].

Paspalanov [11] summarizes some other opinions for the reasons to continue work, supposedly valid for the old people. E. Mayo and M. Argyle put an accent on affiliation (expression of the person's need to unite with other people), status and

dependence. In his own studies Argyle finds out that people who have a high affiliative motivation tend to spend more time with other people, demonstrating warmth and intimacy to those they know. They aim to be close with their colleagues at the workplace and they aim to have a relationship of harmony and to get an acknowledgement. The relationship with their colleagues is one of the reasons to continue working after people get full retirement benefits, something found in a research done by Morse and Weiss. Another motive is connected to acquiring a certain social status as a result of the work that has been done. This status is valid not only within the organization in particular, but outside it just as well. Another motive is dependence, that is, an expression of the person to receive care and protection from more powerful or affluent people. Another aspect of the global problem for the motivation to work is the aspect related to the need to get achievements. Numerous experimental studies on the need to get achievements show that it is a considerable factor related to the personality and psychology, a factor that determines the overall strategy of taking actions, choice of aim, execution of tasks, making decisions and risk-taking.

Maslow tries to find a new approach to explain people's motivation to work. The idea of self-actualization stimulates any searches in this direction. He makes a point of the enormous importance of occupational activity to achieve accomplishment and development to the fullest. The worker's activity cannot be stimulated only by satisfying physical needs and guaranteeing security and safety. Maslow allows for the presence of higher-order motives for the activity of the worker – from acknowledgement and self-accomplishment. This presupposes that the person will do some work that is involving and important, so the worker can reveal his potential and skills to the maximum [12].

Niessen, et al. [13] point out another motive, typical of the ageing people, to continue work. These are the habits of work that were formed in the long years of practice. The complex chain of connections formed in the process of many repetitions of some particular work helps to create a certain dynamic stereotype. This stereotype helps to keep optimal working efficiency which is an important condition for the overall satisfaction from work. It is this satisfaction together with the difficult change of already formed habits and work regime that transform labour from a medium to satisfy needs to a need itself. If there are some deeply rooted stereotypes for doing some occupational activity, a very noticeable 'echo' can be witnessed in the behavior of a person, especially if they have not given the chance to do it. Iolov's conclusion is in the same context [10]: "What makes a strong, if not a powerful impression, is that the pensioner who has just retired successfully, even though he may crave this pension, subjectively resists its ultimate requirements. The irony is that, after a long and very challenging life, when the signs of exhaustion are clearly visible, the pensioner once again returns to that eternal flame of life – labour."

The importance of having an occupation for the ageing people is supported by the tendencies summarized by I. Petrov [14], outlined by the results from psychological studies. They show that old people who have the opportunity to choose on their own the age at which to retire, prefer to retire later. Those who have not had this opportunity have reacted with reluctance and resistance against the forceful retirement from work. Some of them develop a serious and long-term dis adaptation which increases the possibility for suicidal intentions. This happens using the mechanism of "depreciation of values" that makes the pensioner feel lonely and not integrated in the social environment. Retirement makes retired people unable to fully use their vital energy and poses risks for the auto-destructive orientation of that energy.

Gill [15] points out that the model of ageing while working can have another dimension. Pensioners may not always be able to continue practicing the job they have done so far. In such cases they resort to alternative forms of work within the family and the family farm. Helping to raise their grandchildren, doing the chores, and doing the shopping, successfully fill the emotional gaps resulting from retirement. What can also be useful for them is to join various social initiatives like cleaning the park or the garden in front of the residential building, taking care for the shared living areas, participating in any charity campaigns, organizing and taking part in various events and amateur groups, spending time doing their favourite hobby, etc. All this fulfils the need of old people to be useful to their relatives and to the community and restores and bolsters their self-esteem.

Georgiev [16] points out that personality modification under the influence of retirement is a complex and dynamic process that depends both on objective factors and on the subjective evaluation of the work done by a person so far and the occupation that they are looking for. The retrospective analysis and evaluation of main goals, important events and experiences achieved in a person's work up to the present concern the evaluation of one's life cycle following retirement. The worthiness in terms of values of a person's labour and social role that they have experienced is a stimulus to choose the next life strategy, that is, a strategy not to work or to continue working.

Having considered the stance of authors like Gallo, Bradley, [10,16-19], the possible life strategies connected with the period of retirement can be outlined in greater detail. One strategy is that of indifferent acceptance of retirement. It is typical of people who have not put much effort and have not tried to do their best at work, and for most of their life have had a negative attitude towards labour. The goals in their work have been of least importance compared to their goals in life. Such people do not strain emotionally in this critical moment because they have never been part of the team at work and any sentiment is foreign to them. These pensioners accept with great satisfaction the perspectives that are ahead of them, namely those related

to the increased amount of free time they have after retirement and its spending for personal needs and wishes. It is not rare when such people distance themselves from their economically independent children and spare themselves any help that they may offer to raise their grandchildren. They don't aspire to reach a certain social status and don't put any efforts in this direction. These people often underestimate the role of their personal qualities, skills and ambitions in their lives.

Among the people who preserve their positive attitude towards labour are the people who believe that they have achieved the goals in their profession. What is typical for them is that career takes a central place in their system of values and it is closely connected with their job satisfaction and contribution to the job. A significant role in their lives have had the events related to their occupation and self-realization at work. These are people who have become fully aware of the role of their personal qualities when evaluating their current experience. They are slowly approaching old age with feelings of calmness and security; they have already given meaning to their lives and feel that they have done their duties. This is an important starting point for a quicker and complete adaptation and further active participation in occupational and social activities. From a psychological point of view, the readiness of a person to continue working after retirement depends on the level of education they have. Pensioners who are better educated are more inclined to continue working. The professional prestige that was built and defended for years by the retired doctor, teacher, tutor, scientist, etc., affects the self-consciousness in such a manner that they refuse to join the pensioners' group.

At the other pole are the people who painfully experience retirement. These people have not fulfilled their professional goals, and this failure to fulfil them leads to feelings of incomplete job satisfaction. They experience feelings of agitation, anxiety and insecurity. These people suffer from the thought that they are leaving the scene of life forever. On the one hand, they understand that this is a natural process but, on the other hand, dark thoughts and feelings begin to accumulate in them, and they start to possess their minds. What follows is a reversal of social roles, together with difficult adaptation. Anxiety and lack of confidence start to appear. As Satir points out, "as if energy and attention are still directed towards the past and, because of this, very little time is left for the present. As a result, people may begin feeling that they endure the hardships of life rather than enjoying it. A feeling of oppression starts to appear, which grows from the negative assumptions and fantasies about what life is going to be in later years" [20]. Very important in this case are the attitude of colleagues, the attitude of people who prepare the ground for this retirement and the social stereotypes related to it.

K. Alexandrova [21] summarizes some of the mistakes that the relatives of pensioners make that can worsen the situation in the pensioner and lead to a crisis:

- i. Lavish celebrations and presents are often organized for people who retire, the would-be pensioners receive expressions of gratitude, praise and commemoration, but it is this very act of attention that, however well-meaning it may be, provokes the crisis. The reason is that, when the speeches go silent and the fanfares die down, the pensioner who feels like a hero suddenly finds himself alone.
- ii. It is regularly repeated to the pensioner that he has plenty of time and there is no need to hurry. Even if a person is well-meaning, such a message is generally understood as a hint that this pensioner is not expected anywhere, in other words, that he is useless (isn't it true that we are in a hurry when we know that we are needed, and people are waiting for us!).
- iii. When we show fake attention and interest. The more sensitive pensioners can detect insincerity in one's behavior and an attitude like this will only make them withdraw into themselves more.
- iv. The pensioner's wish to take up a favourite occupation of his is met with disapproval among his relatives. The arguments usually are age, the degree of danger of this occupation or its uselessness. All these things cause severe harm to an old person's mind.

A lot of tactfulness is needed to avoid the negative suggestions in this difficult transitory period. But there is still no guarantee that the ex-worker won't fall into the spiral of negative autosuggestions. Should this happen, the causes for the negative emotional states and negative thoughts shall be presumably internal. Negative autosuggestion can be extremely dangerous, and it may lead to negative psychological disorders. Therefore, it has to be dealt with on time [21].

According to Manev, "retirement breaks down a complex unity of links, feelings, thoughts, aspirations that have worked together in the activity of a person not long ago. A dynamic stereotype is stopped, a vital dynamic unity disappears, and it seems that the pensioner starts to live in an area without air. He involuntarily starts thinking that he has ended his life cycle" [22]. During the active part of life, that of working, the dynamic stereotype has been built on the basis of a certain occupation. This is the reason why the transition from one way of life to another should take place on the basis of some occupation. As L. Spasovska points out, "labour (whether it was organized by the community or by the family) provides vital support for the person after retirement." [23]. However, labour has to be voluntary and done consciously, a result of internal impulses and wishes. Personal inclinations and interests will show the person what sort of work to direct his energies to. H. Loewe concludes that "in the period of late maturity, depending on how their abilities have changed, people have to direct their attention and energies to such work that the old person can do better and more attentively than younger people." [24]. Whatever work

role he may choose, it should require less time, it should be of diminished volume and it should not expend much physical and mental energy. Even when reduced, any occupation will promote the inner conviction in pensioners that they can still be valuable, and it will motivate them to support themselves physically and intellectually.

The same opinion is expressed by L Georgiev [16] who points out that a person always considers themselves active and this provides the integrity of his personality. Should he stop believing in himself and in his active role in society, in practice that would be the end of his life. Nature does not allow for psychological death to precede natural death. This is only possible in case of personality degradation. In this context, the sooner the person set himself new goals, the more adequate his adaptation to the new realities of life would be.

Quite a number of people face the onset of ageing in good overall health, being active and able to work. They get their strength and positive feelings when they practice their favourite activities. By forming and sustaining a positive attitude in themselves and the people around them, they do not allow self-absorption to overcome them and keep negative thoughts at bay. The psychological and physical striving to achieve a goal mobilize the body's energy and increase its resistance. This helps pensioners to counterforce old age's negative effects and to preserve their physical and mental status [25]. L Georgiev summarizes that to orient toward better perspectives would also provide better perspectives for living. What is important is that the personality put accent on what it can do and not on what presents some difficulty for this person, the things that have never been easy for them. The first inclination stimulates the vital energies whereas the second suppresses them. Reversely, the lack of physical and mental occupation provokes medical conditions in the process of ageing and approaching the end of one's life cycle.

Granovska discusses in great detail the problem of the mental deformation that retirement may cause. "In the adverse conditions of lack of occupation and apathy, some negative character traits can become more noticeable like conservatism, overestimation of the past, preaching, muttering, self-centeredness, distrust, as well as being easily offended" [26]. The author continues that, considering the possibility of such a mental deformation, the old person has to consciously direct their efforts to sustain their mental flexibility and to overcome the rigidity of their opinions and actions. Having enough self-respect in the period of old age is owing to a great degree to a certain amount of work that has been done. Work does not allow the person to painfully focus on the physiological and pathological changes in the body and it increases the interest in the surrounding world. The overall self-esteem and mood as well as the self-confidence of old people both depend on the degree of a person's preserved ability to work. For this reason, retirement shall be a gradual process because a person's fitness

and good emotional condition depend on the retention of work stereotypes. The sudden withdrawal from work disrupts the rhythm of the biological processes in the body.

Hypodynamic (lack of any activity) is incompatible with human existence. Age physiology proves that activity is one of the most important features of the living creatures [23]. Motor activity is a physiologically stimulating medium to create tension in all tissues, organs and systems. However, as age advances, and in old age, the functional strain (both physical and mental) has to be applied very carefully. The majority of people tend to have heightened expectations of themselves without taking note of their decreased work capacity. The work capacity present in old people depends on some manifested personal differences and varies from low and satisfactory, to high work capacity. Vizev's data show that a fifty-year-old person has 70% of it, whereas after they turn 70 they have 50% of the work capacity they once had when they were young [23]. Because of this work has to be distributed according to the individual's work capacity.

There are always some signs of tiredness after a mental or physical activity. The latter affects the entire nervous system, by exerting a negative influence on the psychological processes and the emotional-volitional part of personality. For this reason, old people have to be strict in switching from periods of activity to periods of rest, and they need to have enough rest for their bodies to fully regain their energy. It has been found that following this cyclicity is one of the important factors for human longevity. The research papers of the lives of people with long lives contribute to this statement, having determined that these people harmonically alternate work and activity with periods of rest [22].

It is important to note that in the onset of old age involuntary processes are predominantly physical and not psychological. The fact that not every work is connected with diminishing one's qualification as age progresses also comes in support of this statement [27]. For example, young drivers are prone to more traffic violations compared to older drivers. As doctors get older and more experienced, the objectiveness of their decisions and the accuracy of their diagnoses improve. The teaching profession also falls into the category of the jobs in which the years of experience play a key role and sometimes teachers are the pinnacle of their career when they retire. The same can be said for scientists, the majority of who reach this peak in their career at exactly that time. It has been found that the productivity of the older generation of scientists decreases not because their intellectual abilities diminish but mainly because their motivation decreases, and they lose some of their courage to be creative. Their knowledge is so advanced that each thought is attacked by an infinite number of counterarguments [26-29]. Many of the representatives of various creative professions from different genres of culture and art can boast with professional longevity. There are many instances of works of art produced by their authors later on in their lives.

Conclusion

It has become clear that having an occupation plays a significant role in the psychological functioning of ageing people. Retirement is an experimental field for the personal skills of the individual to cope with life, for their maturity and the nature of their attitude to reality. Successful life in the later years begins with a process of transition, with a farewell to what has been so far and a welcome to what is going to be, as well as with the retention of an occupation. If a person wants the following years to be successful, he has to actively fight the negative tendencies of this transition because people who have failed to fully go through it cannot focus successfully on their new beginning. And the new beginning, being either a possible work role or a continuation of the old one but this time conforming to the new realities, would lead to overcoming of the mental deficits and regaining of the spiritual homeostasis of a personality.

Conflict of Interest

No economic interests and conflicts of interest.

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