

Chapter 24. Voluntary Work in the Active Aging Experiences of First Generation Immigrant Turks Living in Netherlands

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Introduction

Although there have been studies in recent years which have been conducted on “Turks living abroad,” it is doubtless that more comprehensive and deep prospecting studies are required. Approaches focussing on health conditions in discussing aging should be dispensed with and social facts that “aging as immigrants” involves should be highlighted.

It is from a sociological perspective that the master’s thesis on which the present work is based deals with the phenomenon of aging while still an immigrant. This narrower text discusses issues of the elderly’s participation in community voluntary work as part of social activities. The theme of active aging is the foundation on which the evaluation of the old age period is built in this study.

Reports of OECD, the EU and WHO were used after the relevant literature of social sciences were examined. As a last step before our field work, a “local” study was conducted to determine the current policies and practices about the elderly welfare and active aging and reports of the Netherlands Institute of Social Studies (SCP) funded by the Netherlands government were referred to. Thus, the social context in which those aging as immigrants in the Netherland are located was evaluated in detail from international to national conditions.

A qualitative research was conducted in the field work with a semi-structured questionnaire. In addition, observations were carried out in institutions and centres that the elderly individuals often visited. Considerable amount of time was spent with the elderly and official interviews were conducted with the authorities to collect data.

53 old people were interviewed during the field work. 8 of them were excluded from the study because they were not appropriate for the features of the group in focus. Following five pilot interviews, a 40-member study group was interviewed. The average session took 30 minutes.

Identities and belonging are not regarded as important for the study on account of its content and context. For this reason, ethnic identities were disregarded during the research process. All the elderly who immigrated to the Netherlands from Turkey are identified as “Turkish” in the study.

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The studies on aging and sociology of immigration in Turkey tend to focus on children, women and identities, but there are not enough studies exclusively dealing with the period of old age. Both academic and institutional studies should be carried out to maintain the levels of social interaction and subjective well-being of the Turks living abroad in old age whose numbers will increase in the years to come. Through a systematic collection of data and determination of what is needed, policies have to be developed to provide solutions or prevent crises.

Conceptualization of Active Aging

The concept of active aging basically involves the idea that keeping in old age similar status, roles and behaviours that one had in earlier life, that's staying active, facilitates the process of aging. To this end, previous roles have to be replaced with voluntary work roles, leisure time activities and religion-based activities appropriate for one's age (Hooyman et al., 2015:144). Active aging suggests that the more active the elderly individual is, the more their life satisfaction is (Hooyman et al., 2015:144; Willson, 2007:149). What is more, social and psychological needs in old age are no different from those in middle age (Willson, 2007:149).

While active aging was being discussed at 1997 G-8 Summit, it was recommended that active aging should be fostered with governmental policies and schemes, and the fact that elderly people's social and economic adaptation should be ensured was also on the agenda of the summit (The Denver Summit of the Eight, 1997:1). WHO has adopted this guiding slogan about the increasing longevity: years have been added to life and we have to add life to years (WHO, 2011, cited in Walker, 2006:84).

Active aging is placed in a state-politics-producer triangle of politics, which, for sociologists, poses the risk of studies being used decontextualized from their humanistic context. With this concern in mind, in discussing the theme of active aging in the present study, we tried to create a content which is individual- and community-centred and culture-sensitive, avoiding an economy-focussed approach. Furthermore, not only are outdoors social activities considered important, but indoors activities are also included in the study. The value of activities relevant to traditional culture is thus not to be ignored.

Thus, the study not only deals with activities on a continuum of working-producing-economic contribution, but it also aims to avoid the trap of a wrong approach restricted to economic concerns under the pretext of a theme of active aging focussing on subjective well-being. None of these activities is expected to be carried out through an official membership. In this way, activities that are engaged in without any official documents or membership being required in traditional culture do not go unnoticed in the study.

Conceptualization of Voluntary Work

Nowadays the length of time that the elderly population spends in retirement is increasing. Active aging is concerned with how this "new" free time brought about by the longer old age is to be spent and what can be substituted for the social roles lost. Many studies have been conducted on the individual and social value of participation in volunteer work within the framework of modern active aging and it

is stated in these studies that there are correlations between volunteering and subjective well-being (Fengler, 1994, cited by Onyx and Warburton, 2003:66). Taking part in volunteer work also contributes to the maintenance of meaningful social roles in old age by playing an important role in creating an identity for the elderly different from the one when they did paid work (Bradley, 2003:49). One of the results of the loss of occupations in old age is the emergence of social, ethical and intellectual differences between generations (Hooyman and Kiyak, 2010:52).

For today's elderly population, opportunities for volunteer work which are thought to enhance personal satisfaction/strengthening are increasing in number and variety (Carr, Biggs and Kimberley, 2013:34). Volunteer work includes the following activities: helping neighbours, supporting charity work, guiding newly arrived immigrants, training sports teams, cooperating with schools in various areas to foster communication across generations, teaching personal skills and crafts to young generations, sitting up with patients in hospitals, caring for patients' relatives, keeping company by phone with old people who cannot leave home, acting in theatre, reading books for blind people, taking people who lost their spouse out for lunch to save them from social isolation and loneliness (Bradley, 2003; Miranda, 2011). We witnessed the following volunteer activities in the field: taking care of old/dependent people in the neighbourhood, doing volunteer work in mosques or associations, tutoring neighbours and caring for orphans.

Methodology

Marrying (2011:25) proposes five basic principles for qualitative research: the study must be strongly "relevant to the subject"; the research subject must be "described" and "interpreted"; the subject must be studied "in its natural and daily context" and the "context and time" in which the generalisation is valid must be clearly stated. The phenomenological research design was used in the present study.

Speech was recorded for all the participants except one who did not allow us to record. The recorded data was later transcribed. After descriptive analysis, some themes and codes were determined, relations between them were identified and thus a systematic analysis was carried out. After the data analysis was completed, we interpreted it drawing on the relevant literature.

Research Environment

The areas most densely populated by Turks in the Netherlands are clearly delineated by reports of SCP. Interviews were made in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht and Zootermeer. Of the 40-person research group, 7 people were interviewed at home visit, 13 at charity bazaars, 17 at a mosque, 1 at a coincidental encounter at a shop, 1 at a university canteen and 1 at a daytime care centre for the elderly. The researcher spent about 30 hours at the charity bazaars. The researcher first got warmly closer to the group at the charity bazaars, interviewing the elderly people in person at a park nearby afterwards. Interviews at a mosque outnumber other locations, which results from the fact that a mosque is not only a place for worship in the Netherlands, but also form a complex including multi-functional economic and social interaction such as a barber, supermarket, butcher's, wedding hall, local association house.

In addition to the personal interviews above, authorities at official bodies were also interviewed. About two months before the field work was carried out, we got in contact with and arranged appointments with NGOs, university, private organisations and municipalities which work on elderly immigrants. 12 official interviews were conducted in this context.

Participants

Even though the study group was planned to be limited to those aged 65 and over before the field work was initiated, it was realised in the field that it was not a realistic expectation, and thus being a pensioner, not an age limit, was chosen as a criterion to determine the study group. The study group has the following features: having got retired or being on a disability pension, being physically and mentally healthy, being self-sufficient, having no difficulty leaving home by himself/herself, having no obstacle to community involvement and having emigrated to the Netherland from Turkey when young.

The study group has 16 women and 24 men and the average age is 66,525. The earliest year when the subjects migrated to the Netherlands is observed to be 1964, the latest is 1980. The average year of emigration is 1973. The whole group involved consisted of immigrants of the first generation. As for their state of health, 20 have unfavourable conditions of health, 17 have no medical problem, and 3 have no clear statement about their health. About their self-sufficiency, the study group has 6 participants who receive municipality's weekly free service of home cleaning, but have no difficulty leaving home alone. 1 participant receives assistance from the elderly care home to get his/her market purchases carried home. 33 participants do not need any support for their daily requirements.

Limitations of the Study

The study has four limitations. The first is that it lacks any control groups. The study involves a group of people who got old as immigrants and studied them in the country of immigration where they grew old. However, no control groups who grew old where they were born are formed that consisted of either Dutch or Turkish natives. Therefore, we could not make a detailed comparison and contrast in terms of similarities and differences.

The second limitation is having only cross-sectional data. The third limitation is that the time period in which the field work was conducted coincided with one when Turkish citizens started to go to Turkey from the Netherlands on "annual leave." It is for this reason that long and detailed home interviews are few, and people on disabled pension were included in the study group in addition to retired individuals aged 65 and over.

The fourth limitation of the study is that it has a homogeneous study group. That is not scientifically problematic for a qualitative study which does not aim to make a generalisation that can be extended to the whole group of Turkish elderly people living in the Netherlands, yet it is a point to be taken into account.

Conclusions

Given the Turkish elderly's time expenditure and active involvements, they are understood to be not individuals who spend their time at home passively. The great majority of them have programs that provided opportunities of social contact and

participation – programs that they take part in steadily and regularly, that contribute to their subjective-wellbeing and that play a considerable role in their use of leisure time indoors and outdoors.

If it is considered in a context sensitive to traditional culture, it is understood that the Turkish elderly people that the thesis involved experience an active aging process. It should not be regarded as a deficiency that they are active in a triangle of neighbour-mosque-association that is exclusively made up of participants from their internal community group because of the language problem. Moreover, even though a discrete control group is not formed for the study, when compared with the native population, health problems are observed to arise at earlier ages in the study group.

The elderly are asked about many types of volunteer work. The results are given under five headings:

Nursing Elderly/Dependent People in the Neighbourhood

27 of the 40 participants take care of elderly/dependent people in their neighbourhood. 13 of the 27 people occasionally, 7 often and the other 7 regularly nurse. None of these volunteer activities is carried out as part of an official membership in an organisation. This interaction is done as a result of the Turkish elderly attaching importance to neighbour relationships in their social network. As the needs of the elderly and dependent individuals in the Netherlands are regularly met by the government, the need for neighbour support considerably decreases.

“I have two elderlies to serve. One is a disabled Dutch. I visit him regularly and bring fresh fish to him as he likes a lot. I also make phone calls to him. The other one is a Turkish neighbour of mine who is lonely. I visit him regularly and we also go to the coffee houses together (Zootermeer, Male, Married, 62, 1976)”

“I have a Spanish neighbour older than me. If he asked for help, I would help him, but he wouldn’t. We went to their place to have a chat the other day and he said ‘thank you for talking with me’. He has nobody to help him. He can hardly walk. I have another neighbour aged 76. He has gone on holiday. I help him wander around (Rotterdam, Female, Single, 66, 1974)”

“My next door neighbour is Dutch, he is old. When we make bread, we give him some, when we clean our windows, we clean his too. In short we keep an eye on him (Zootermeer, Female, Single, 66, 1970)”

Voluntary Work in Mosques

The mosques are found to provide areas for social participation. Most of volunteer activities are carried out through mosques. In their free time, the elderly individuals are actively engaged in effective efforts to maintain the mosques that they have had built when they were young.

10 of the participants occasionally do voluntary work at the mosque, 5 do that at least one day a week, and 6 every day. Therefore, for 11 participants of the 40-person study group, doing volunteer work at the mosque occupies a steady and important place in their weekly routines.

What is to be emphasised here is that the elderly people do not only use the mosque to engage in various activities (such as praying, socializing at the tea house and playing billiards), but also consider it important to do voluntary work for.

“I am responsible for bookkeeping. I organize the annual picnic and the pleasure trips for ladies. I also teach children every weekend. I have 20 students. I arrange the monthly breakfast for ladies. As this mosque’s ladies, we have more than 100 scholarship students. I also arrange the weekly charity bazaar (Rotterdam, Female, Single, 65, 1973)”

“We prepared a list of volunteers to take turns for service during the Ramadan evenings; we come here and cook meals, make and sell manti and gözleme (traditional Turkish food). Sponsors provide the minced meat with which we prepare food to sell for charity profits, and the funds obtained are spent on the mosque (Zootermeer, Female, Single, 66, 1970).

Voluntary Work in Associations

There are also participants doing voluntary work at Turkish associations; 2 of them every day, 1 regularly and 1 occasionally. It is found out that the study group usually socialises around a neighbour-mosque-association triangle.

“As a retired teacher, I have 70 students and teach them every weekend. They learn how to speak Turkish properly and also our customs and history (Rotterdam, Male, Married, 60, 1980)”

After getting retired from a 25-year job, I felt stressed in limbo. I took part in the formation of 3 associations and served in their management. Whenever the municipality applies to me for any assistance, I go and help without fail. I help with translation for those who do not know the language. I help with any problem like healthcare for the ill. There is certainly something every week for which I provide assistance (Rotterdam, Male, Married, 58, 1973).

As can be seen, both participants are on a disability pension and chose to be volunteers as a new social role after years of paid work. Since their responsibilities in the associations required legal membership, they are to be included in modern active aging. In this respect, these participants are different from the rest of the study group.

Educating Neighbours

Two of the participants teach their neighbours how to read Qur’an every week at arranged hours on certain days.

“I teach my neighbours Qur’an twice a week. There are regular classes on Monday-Tuesday or on Thursday-Friday during 10 to 12 in the morning. We are of the same age (Rotterdam, Female, Single, 65, 1978)”

Nursing Orphan Children

One of the participants volunteer to nurse orphans in cooperation with the state.

“Since 2000, the police have brought parentless children/orphans to my house, and they stay with me until they are placed at a permanent place. I accept 0-12 aged

kids. They can be both Turkish and Dutch children, and both healthy and disabled. (Rotterdam, Female, Single, 65, 1973)”

Discussion

It was seen that the first generation Turkish elderly living in the Netherlands took new roles during their retirement. Volunteer work occupied a vital place in their aging process that could be improved further. This interpretation of the findings was determined by sensitivity to traditional culture.

It is observed that the Turkish elderly spend their free and leisure time in a triangle of neighbour-mosque-association. The main reason for this situation is the elderly's problem of mastery of Dutch and cultural differences. The Turkish senior citizens do not prefer to go to district (gathering) houses where people of any origin spend time. Rather than in the modern community in which they live, they socialise in places and groups that belonged to traditional community, relatively preserve by their own internal groups. As a result, they take and keep new social roles and positions in this traditional system. Commitment to traditional culture also let them to meet people of foreign origin only in the framework of neighbourhood relationships.

Voluntary activities increase life satisfaction, subjective well-being and social participation. It is a field open to socio-political practices, because when gradual retirement systems start to be applied, it will have a more significant place on the political agenda.

Sociological evaluations should not overlook the inherent features of aging as immigrants. Before all else, this group has the trouble of cumulative disadvantages as compared with those aging at their birthplaces. Among the disadvantages are: Not being as healthy as they were when young, lacking mastery of the native language, decreasing life satisfaction under minority psychology and being deprived of cultural practices common to old age back in their native countries. It should keep in mind that this elderly group is not homogenous and every religious, cultural, historical, ethnical origin/membership necessitates novel solution alternatives for different problems. Lastly, it is a common knowledge that groups aging as immigrants have poorer medical conditions than native populations. Paying attention to such differences will keep studies to the point.

Considering mosques provide locations for social contact and participation for the Turkish elderly, we could think of a scheme formulated as “the mosque as a location where old people can actively occupy themselves in later years in Turkey with an aging population.”

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