

WELLSO 2016 - III International Scientific Symposium on Lifelong Wellbeing in the World

Social Wellbeing of Older Adults through the Prism of Social Challenges

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Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2017.01.11>

The paper considers the peculiarities of social well-being of older adults who represent the generation of baby boomers. The baby boom generation consists of people born during the demographic post-world war II baby boom between the years 1946 and 1964 in Britain and in Russia. Approaches to the research of wellbeing among Russian and foreign scientists are presented. Social wellbeing is a great concern in social philosophy. Several social challenges are described to form possible dimensions of social wellbeing. The author emphasizes a dichotomy of social well-being, considering external and internal determinants. The author analyzes social well-being through a prism of social difficulties (social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, social coherence) that form the model of social well-being. The potential benefits of social life are a sense of belonging, social integration and a sense of shared consciousness. Comparing how older adults of Britain and Russia overcome difficulties and adapt to the new social realities, the author comes to a conclusion that subjective factors define the readiness of older adults to shift to a new level and influence their ability to cope with social difficulties.

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Keywords: Social wellbeing; older adults; generation of baby boomers; social challenges.

1. Introduction

Social wellbeing is an important indicator of the state of society in the 21st century, which also gives an idea of what the society actually looks like and the importance of multiple processes in society. The study of social wellbeing of older people is especially important against the backdrop of a pronounced trend of aging population in Russia and the UK.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there is no commonly used definition of an older adult and there is no clear answer to the question at what age people become “older adults” or

“senior citizens”. The most developed world countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of “elderly” or older person.

In many countries, the older adults are now the fastest growing part of the total population, they comprise a growing proportion of global population. 10 million people in the UK are over 65 years old. The latest projections are for 5½ million more elderly people in 20 years time and the number will have nearly doubled to around 19 million by 2050. Within this total, the number of very old people grows even faster. There are currently three million people aged more than 80 years and this is projected to almost double by 2030 and reach eight million by 2050 (UK parliament website, 2015).

Latest forecasts focus on the increase in the proportion of older people in Russia. The number of elderly people in Russia over 65 years old exceeded 10 million people in 1970. In 2006 the number of elderly people in Russia over 65 years old exceeded 20 million people. The latest projections are for 24-30 million elderly people in 15 years time (Website of the higher school of economics, 2015).

2. Main part

Causes of human aging are hidden in the scientific and technological progress and social advances. The development of medicine, the commitment to a healthy lifestyle, moderate alternation of work and rest contributed to the growth of the population of elderly people. Having analyzed the literature in the field of social philosophy and social wellbeing, we can draw the conclusion that wellbeing is a multidimensional concept. The basic definition which we have chosen for this publication was given by Dodge, R. (2012): “In order to move closer to a new definition of wellbeing, therefore, we have focused on three key areas: the idea of a set point for wellbeing; the inevitability of equilibrium/homeostasis; and the fluctuating state between challenges and resources. Consequently, we can propose a new definition of wellbeing as the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced”. (Fig.1) This diagram is simple and represents wellbeing for people regardless of age, regardless of culture and regardless of sex.

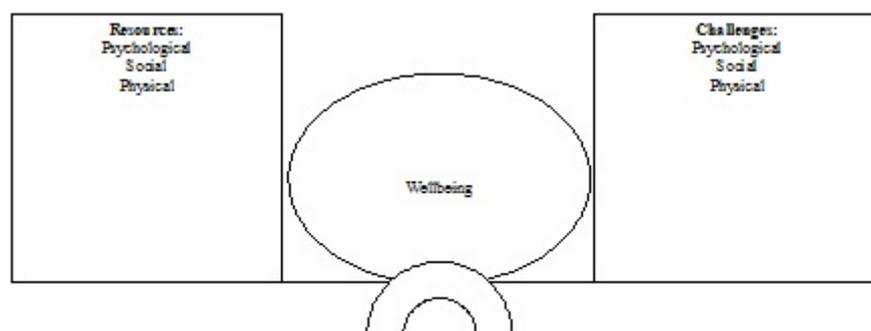


Fig.1. Wellbeing

Sociologists and psychologists agree that the nature of social wellbeing dualistic. Traditionally, they focus on external (the implementation of plans, lifestyle, life satisfaction) and internal (maintaining a

stable psychological state) determinants of social wellbeing. In other words, they concentrate on public and private life.

Thus, we can draw the conclusion that in addition to the personal characteristics of wellbeing, there are social problems and challenges. It is therefore necessary to study and analyze social wellbeing through the prism of social constraints and challenges that define a multidimensional model of social wellbeing. Professor Corey Lee M. Keyes (1998) identifies the following social problems (challenges) that form the model of social wellbeing:

2.1 Social integration

Social integration is the evaluation of the quality of one's relationship to society and community. Healthy, strong and energetic individuals feel that they are a part of society. Integration is therefore the extent to which people feel they have something in common with others who constitute their social reality (e.g., their neighbourhood), as well as the degree to which they feel that they belong to their communities and society.

2.2 Social acceptance

Social acceptance is the interpretation of the society through individual's character and personal qualities. Individuals who illustrate social acceptance trust others, think that others are capable of kindness, and believe that people can be industrious, kind, reliable and hardworking. Socially accepting people feel comfortable with others and have benevolent views of human nature. Social acceptance is the social analogue to personal acceptance: people who feel good about their personalities and accept both the good and the bad aspects of their lives are typical examples of good mental health.

2.3 Social contribution

Social contribution is the evaluation of social values and it includes the belief that we are the members of society and we can give something valuable to the world. It is the assessment of one's social values. Social contribution involves the concepts of efficacy and accountability. Self-efficacy is the belief that one can perform certain behaviour and achieve specific goals. Self-efficacy or the belief in their own strength reflects the ability to perform tasks and achieve goals. Social responsibility involves the obligation (duty) of a person to society. Social contribution shows whether people realize that what they do is appreciated by society and whether they are felt appreciated.

2.4 Social actualization

Social actualization is the evaluation of the potential and the trajectory of society. This is the belief in the evolution of society and the sense that society has potential which is being realized through its institutions and citizens. Healthier people are hopeful about the condition and future of society, and they can recognize society's potential.

2.5 Social coherence

Social coherence is the perception of the quality, organization, and operation of the social world, and it includes a concern for knowing about the world. Healthier people not only care about the kind of world in which they live, but also feel that they can understand what is happening around them. They do not maintain the illusion that the imaginary world is the real world only.

Studies have shown that older adults of European countries and Russia overcome difficulties and adapt to new social realities in different ways. It is influenced by the correlation of socio-economic, physical, mental and cultural factors.

Today the baby boomers generation dominates in Great Britain. It is a post-war generation of people born in the 40s - 60s during the period of sharp rise in the birth rate. There is no definite opinion, what caused the increase in the birth rate: sociologists believe that it is a set of economic, social and psychological factors. Firstly, the decreased number of women who prefer to remain childless. Secondly, many women put off having children because of the Great Depression and the World War II. The third reason is the economic growth in the post-war period.

Baby boomers are accustomed to the high standard of living. They are demanding, spoiled with social benefits, and have the highest pension. They destroy the strict limits set by parents and society, changing the idea of old age: they travel, work, dress up, imitating the younger generation. The older generation has experience, wisdom, skills and energy to help improve the quality of life.

In the early 1970s, American gerontologists, B. Neugarten (1974) and E. Shanas, first mentioned the “young old” and the “old-old”. They illustrated substantial aggregate differences between the characteristics of Americans aged 55–74, whom they termed the “young old”, and those aged 75 and older, the “old-old.” The “young old”, to whom old adults under the age of 75 years are often attributed to, differ from their peers from half a century ago in good health, relatively high life expectancy, high educational status, relatively high level of well-being, based on sustainable income in the form of pensions and accumulated wealth... The “young old” are active and energetic. After receiving leisure time as a gift from a society, many people spend it on social activities or travelling. ... Lifestyle of these people does not correspond to the stereotypical roles attributed to the elderly (Denisenko, 2005). Baby boomers can be attributed to a generation of the “young old”. The “young old” look with hope to the future; keep the attitudes of working age. According to researches, there is a high percentage of older entrepreneurs in the UK. With aging people get more opportunities to accumulate capital or get credit. Consequently, elderly people are convinced that they can be successful, believe in personal abilities and achieve significant results. It implies a welcoming attitude to society and to themselves.

Europe has already reinterpreted the subject of old age, human life is recognized as the highest value and society is attentive to the weakest (the elderly) people. This is reflected in various social projects aimed at active aging and full retirement; magazines aimed at an elderly audience. For example, the project “Representation of aging: look at me”, the aim of which is the perception of the elderly women image in society. It was decided to revise the stereotypical image of aging in relation to elderly women. With the help of visual means women can tell about the experience of old age and create their own image of aging, thus adapting to the new social situation and encouraging other women to enjoy life. Society focuses on the fact that elderly people can create and fulfill dreams.

Therefore, the transition to a new social situation and overcoming social difficulties occur unnoticed. Socio-economic factors (higher pensions, social benefits, and quality health care, social projects) and cultural factors (reinterpretation of old age, breaking stereotypes attitudes) facilitate the transition to a new demographic level of the “young old” and to the following level of the “old old”.

The problem of aging is also relevant for Russia, however, the quality of life and social well-being lags behind European standards. Today's older generation in Russia - a generation born in the 40s-60s, which could also be called the baby boomers, as baby boom was recorded in the postwar period. It is a generation, born in the country that won the Great Patriotic War and conquered space. Unlike Britain, which came out of the war weakened, having lost the role of a leading world power, the country has become one of the leading powers.

It should be noted that the Russian baby boomers generation has peculiar character traits such as optimism and determination, allowing solving problems at the elderly age, despite the low standard of living, poor health care, poverty and insecurity.

For example, the problem of social participation is achieved through family relations. To fill the life spare time, the old adults turn attention to children and grandchildren. If assistance is received with gratitude and elderly people see their value, belief in their own efficacy is enhanced. In this case, old adults are the guardians of family values, experience, wisdom, thereby realizing their potential. Since in Russia there are very few projects that help elderly people remain socially included and find the internal resources of aging. They find a solution in diverse leisure activities (gardening, joint trips, etc.). Hobby helps to find friends, associates, remain optimistic and socialize with other people.

Under the influence of subjective and objective reasons it is difficult for old adults to adapt to the changing social situation. There are several reasons. “First of all, in public opinion there is a stereotype to this age group that carries mainly gerontophobia attitudes to the period of old age, and projected not only by society, but also by elderly people in relation to their age. Secondly, the level of involvement of the older generation in the modern transformation processes and practical development are problematic” (Butueva, 2013). Thus, the transformation of elderly people to the new situation is associated with certain difficulties. The process of adaptation to the new conditions is complicated not only because of age-related changes, but also due to the stereotypical perception of elderly people experiencing the fear of old age and loneliness. As a rule, these phobias are a reflection of social attitudes and orientations. These people often live with illusions, think of the past.

Shmerlina I.A. (2013) identifies three alternative transitions to a new social level:

1. Maintenance of pre-pensionary lifestyle with the attitudes of the active working age;
2. Living out associated with the activity decline in all (or at least socially important) aspects of life, the absence of new prospects, the reorientation of attention to the current issues of life support and health maintenance;
3. The reorientation to social and personal realization in new areas of life.

Most of Russian elderly people implement the first variant of the transition - the preservation of active working age. Often, such choice is imposed by material necessity, since many elderly people cannot live on a pension. The first variant can be called positive aging: elderly people are active and

curious, take care about their health, they do not think of themselves as of elderly people. They are energetic and realize their full potential in society.

As it was already mentioned, the second transition is associated with the decline in activity and loss of interest in life. Many elderly people perceive old age as the end of life's journey, projecting the gerontophobia attitudes on themselves. Such people are socially off; do not try to re-think the old age and use their spare time efficiently. Lifestyle of such people corresponds to the stereotypical roles of old adults.

Applying the classification of Bernis Neugartens (1974), the third transition is the level of the "young old" who perceive free time as a gift, find a new meaning of life, and enjoy social activities. But "such transition is possible only if there is a sufficient level of financial independence, which gives freedom from household chores" (Shmerlina, 2013). That is, the influence of socio-economic factors makes it possible to implement the third transition.

3. Conclusion

Thus, the social well-being can be formed through the prism of social challenges (adaptation, participation, integrity, etc.) that must be overcome by older adults while moving to a new social level (the old age). And it is subjective factors (attitudes, ability to adapt to the new reality) that determine willingness of an old adult to move to the level of the "young old" and the ability to cope with social challenges.

The elderly generation of Britain is internally ready to the old age: they rethink the old age, breaking stereotypes and believing in themselves, perceive old age as a competitive advantage. In Russia, the fear of the old age and focus on the living out brake inner transformation processes that are responsible for the transition to a new level. Overcoming gerontophobia attitudes and breaking stereotypes will provide overcoming of social difficulties and, as a consequence, the transition to a new social level (Beskrovnaya, 2015).

Acknowledgements

This work was performed by the authors in collaboration with Tomsk Polytechnic University within the project in Evaluation and enhancement of social, economic and emotional wellbeing of older adults under the Agreement No.14.Z50.31.0029

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2017.01.11>

eISSN: 2357-1330 / Corresponding Author: Ludmila V. Beskrovnaya

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

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