

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Influence of Family Interaction on an Elderly Person's Emotional Well-Being

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

Research is detailed when it comes to the effect that social support has on an elderly person's well being both physically and mentally; however research lacks information on the ways in which an elderly person who lives in a retirement center's social support and involvement affects them on a day to day basis. The purpose of this research was to determine the level of involvement in residents of a retirement center's families and other social systems, and how that affects the ways in which the elderly function on a day to day basis. The research was done through interviews of residents in a retirement home, and the findings suggest that the primary source of support in an elderly person's life while they are living in a place such as Oak Crest is their family, and the more they interact with their family, the higher their self reported level of health is.

Background

Family and social interaction play a large part in the overall emotional and mental well-being of individuals across their lifetime. Older and elderly people, especially those that are living in residential communities such as Oak Crest: DeKalb Area Retirement Center in DeKalb, Illinois, are particularly reliant on interaction from peers that live in the same communities they do. Oftentimes elderly people who live in these types of communities do not get as much social interaction as they would like from other residents, the staff, or their family. Residents can at times feel as though they are more isolated from their families while they live at the assisted living communities rather than when they were living independently. The residents that feel isolated may tend to not have as many friends or not be willing to engage in social activities of the community. This research will include details of residents' opinions of their levels of involvement with activities put on by Oak Crest, their interpretations of how involved they are with their families, as well as general questions about their lives and happiness levels. The researcher will then relate this information that to other research that has been done in similar situations.

Literature Review

Social support is of vital importance in the successful aging of the elderly population. According to an article by Neal Krause (2001), social support has three components: "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, information leading the subject to believe that he is esteemed and valued, and information leading the subject to believe that he belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligations." Whether a person is elderly or young, these components of social support apply in the lives of every person. Social support is especially important in the lives of the elderly, though, because they typically are no longer engaged in many other activities. Some may have hobbies; however the main function of retirement and old age is rest, relaxation, and involvement in social activities and hobbies. Benjamin Cornwell (2011) noted in his research on trends in social contact of the elderly, elderly people tend to have smaller social groups, but the social groups that they have tend to be more supportive than other ages' social groups. Additionally, Krause (2001) in his research on social support noted that the elderly adults who are in these supportive but small social groups also have better physical and mental health overall. Health is related to emotional and social interactions even in the way that the majority of health status assessments and indicators are subjective assessments or base their results off of self-reports of mental or emotional symptoms (Linda George, 2001). Due to the fact that the elderly are the only age group to live in nursing homes, and are most likely at least partially isolated from family, social support is of utmost importance to their general health status.

In the residential context, Debra Street and Stephanie Woodham Burge (2012) point out that people who were economically disadvantaged throughout their lives tend to be less likely to afford a quality assisted living facility, therefore restricting the amount of support and general happiness that they can have towards the end of their lives. The context that a person lives plays a great role, and although personality characteristics are influential in how a person's life plays out, external environmental aspects take part in overall health as well (Burge 2012). Phone calls can substitute for actual social interaction in residents of an assisted living facility that do not get

much social contact, or the social contact that they would like (Burge 2012). The elderly are at high risk for feeling as though they are isolated from their families and those who are important to them, therefore it is important for residential facilities such as nursing homes and assisted living facilities to engage residents in social activities.

Research is detailed when it comes to the effect that social support has on an elderly person's well being both physically and mentally; however research lacks information on the ways in which an elderly person who lives in a retirement center's social support and involvement affects them on a day to day basis.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the level of involvement in residents of a retirement center's families and other social systems, and how that affects the ways in which the elderly function on a day to day basis. Social interaction is a determining factor in a person's levels of overall health and it also a factor in a person's level of happiness. When people age, they oftentimes experience a constriction of their social group which can be the result of deaths or friends moving away. One typical constant in an elderly person's social support group is their family, and their family's level of involvement plays a role in how satisfied they are with their relationship.

Methods

The research in this study was done by conducting interviews based on a set of 11 demographic questions and 18 survey questions that were created specifically for use in this research. The participants were comprised of 19 residents of Oak Crest: DeKalb Area Retirement Center in DeKalb, Illinois ranging in age from 68-93 years old. These residents lived in varied styles of living at Oak Crest. Of the residents that participated, 11 were female and 8 were male, and they all identified as Caucasian. Seven of the residents were currently married, 10 were widowed, and 2 were single, and they ranged in the time they have lived at Oak Crest from 6 months to 21 years. The interviews were set up by the Resident Services Coordinator for Oak Crest based on her perception of their available long term memory and their willingness to participate in the research project. Participants were not given compensation for their involvement in this research project. Each interview took approximately 10-20 minutes depending on the depth of the participant's answers and the speed at which they could recall memories. Participants were not rushed, and had the opportunity to tell stories and give as detailed of explanations as they saw fit. Notes and responses on the interview were written or typed while the interview took place, and later compiled to form conclusions and explanations. Table 1.1 shows demographic information of all respondents.

Table 1.1 Demographics

Interviewee	Marital Status ¹	Gender ²	Length of Stay at Oak Crest/yr	Number of Children	Children in the Area? ³	Number of Grand-children	Frequency of Children's Call
A	W	F	6	2	2:0	5	weekly
B	W	F	9	3	1:2	7	weekly
C	S	F	21.5	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
D	W	F	3	2	2:0	0	daily
E	M	F	3	3	2:1	4	3 times/wk
F	M	F	2	6	6:0	11	Email
G	M	M	2	6	6:0	11	Email
H	W	F	6	3	0:3	2	daily
I	W	F	1.5	5	3:0	13	daily
J	W	F	14.5	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
K	W	F	3	4	2:1 ⁴	6	4 times/wk
L	W	F	2	2	1:1	6	2 times/wk
M	M	M	.5	2	1:0 ⁴	3	Texting
N	M	M	9	2	0:2	9	weekly
O	W	M	4.5	1	0:1	2	weekly
P	S	M	4	0	N/A	0	N/A
Q	M	M	11	2	1:1	3	weekly
R	W	M	3	5	3:1 ³	12	weekly
S	M	M	2	2	1:1	4	daily

¹W is equated to widowed, S is equated to single, and M is equated to married

²F is equated to female, M is equated to male.

³Do Children Live in the Area represented by Number of Children Living in the Area: Number of Children Not Living in the Area, with the radius being approximately 50-60 miles.

⁴Loss of a child

Results

Through detailed analysis of the interviews that were conducted, several themes were identified: Life satisfaction and Self Rated Health Status, Family Relationships, and Assistance from Family, and each will be discussed below.

Life Satisfaction and Self Rated Health Status

Through conducting interviews with a number of residents at Oak Crest, researchers came across some interesting responses from residents, which therefore led to interesting overall conclusions. All of the residents at Oak Crest that were included in this study reported that they were satisfied with their lives in one way or another, although some were more ambiguous about their reason for their positive life satisfaction. However, there was a wide variety in the responses to the question that was posed for them about their perceived health status. The interviews resulted in 6 residents rating themselves as healthy, 12 rating themselves as fairly healthy, and one resident rating herself as in poor health.

The interviews provided a unanimous response describing a mid to high satisfaction with the lives that the residents had lived, with reasons for this high satisfaction ranging from a satisfaction with work, to having a successful marriage. It was found through the interviews that those who discussed being satisfied with their lives because of the work that they had done were overwhelmingly male, while those that responded by saying they were satisfied with their lives because of things having to do with their families such as being proud of the way they raised their children and being a good spouse to their partner were females. Included in the responses from males were discussions of awards they had received while working, promotions they had received, and places that they had travelled to. One couple that participated in the interview shared that they had travelled to every state in the country except Oregon, Washington, and Alaska, however the wife admitted that travelling was more of her husband's passion than hers.

Women typically included discussions of the achievements of their children and husband rather than their personal achievements. It can be argued that these women grew up in a time where fewer women worked outside of the home, and therefore their successes in life are directly related to their children's lives because they raised the children. One woman interviewed described being satisfied with her life both because of her children and husband's achievements, but also because of the volunteer work she did in the community for 16 years. There were a few respondents that were females that described achievements they had made outside of the home as reasons that they were satisfied with their lives; however those responses were less frequent in terms of how females perceived their levels of life satisfaction.

In the research through interviews that have been done at Oak Crest, it was found that more males rated themselves as being in good health, while the majority of women in this study rated themselves as fairly or moderately healthy. It is of some interest to note that one male in this research study rated his health as excellent except for having Polio. While others decided to rate their health lower due to diseases they have been diagnosed with such as Polio, this singular man did not identify himself with his disease, rather he was trying to look past it.

Family Relationships

There was quite a variety of responses in relation to family relationships and family involvement among this interview sample at Oak Crest. A large number of participants described their relationships with their family as very good and healthy. The majority of participants went so far as to say that they believe they are kept up to date in all of their family members lives, and they do not feel as though they are left out of anything. This, however, was contradictory to a good portion of the responses received about the last family function that the residents attended or experienced with their families, because some of the residents described their last family function as being on that was a major holiday.

From this the researcher can surmise that the residents do not have a lot of social interaction with their families outside of major holidays. One conclusion that could be drawn from these responses is that they could possibly be embarrassed about not being closer to their families than they would like to be. On another note, another conclusion that could be drawn from these responses is that the residents talk to their family on the phone more than they see them in person. The overwhelming majority of residents listed their family as their greatest source of support and for them to not have a lot of interaction with a group of people that they claim to be most supportive of them is contradictory, and could result in an embarrassing situation when they realize the contradiction.

Interestingly enough, in addition to the residents feeling as if they are kept up to date with the events and issues going on in their loved one's lives, it was also found that they reportedly communicate with their families on the phone at least once a week on average. When participants were asked how their relationship with their grandchildren was, the majority of the residents cited a good relationship. However, when participants were asked if they received a card from their grandchildren on their last birthday, they pondered the question for quite some time before answering. When the residents finally thought of an answer, it was that if they received a card at all from their grandchildren on their last birthday, it was sent from the resident's children and the grandchildren's names were signed.

This would imply to an outside source such as myself that the resident's relationships with their grandchildren were not as ideal and happy as they made them out to be, because in some cases a close relationship would result in a birthday card. Additionally, participants were asked how they felt about their grandchildren, and if there was anything that they wished they could change about their relationship with them. The overwhelming majority of residents stated that either they would not change anything about their relationship with their grandchildren, or the only thing they would change would be to see them more often. The conclusions that can be drawn from this would be that either the residents do not place much value on their relationships with their grandchildren in particular, or they have a skewed idea of the amount of involvement that their family overall plays in their lives. Another conclusion that could be drawn is that the expectation of child or grandchild involvement is low, therefore showing that the relationship that the family experiences is normal to them.

Assistance from the Family

In the interview-style research that was conducted with residents of Oak Crest, results pointed out a lot about the way the residents perceive their family's level of involvement, and what that means to the residents. The research found that the closer family members are to their elderly relatives in Oak Crest, the more likely they were to visit or help with tasks associated with having a relative in an assisted living/retirement community. Residents reported that their family members that lived close typically helped them with getting around town to doctor appointments and to the grocery store. Residents also pointed out that they sometimes take a bus to the grocery store, therefore relieving their family members of the responsibility of transporting them.

The residents at Oak Crest cited reasons for family not visiting as often as they would like as being that the family is very busy, what with grandchildren's after-school activities and children's jobs. The residents who talked about the fact that their families were very busy as a reason for them not visiting often typically went to great lengths to emphasize the level of busyness in the interviews. Although the residents did not specify this, the implication of these results point to the idea that the elderly wish they could see their family members more, however they feel as though they need to make excuses for why they do not see them very often.

Discussion

This research study was developed in order to gain greater understanding of how an elderly person's social support is related to their emotional health and how they function daily. The interviews that were conducted provided insight into a group of elderly people's perceived

level of social support as well as how they rated their health, and how they felt with their families. It was found that, consistent with Benjamin Cornwell's (2011) research that elderly people tend to have smaller social groups, but the social groups that they have tend to be more supportive than other ages' social groups, the elderly people interviewed in the study cited smaller groups of support systems such as the children they have, however they rated their levels of involvement with the events in their families lives as being high. These results point to the fact that although the elderly people interviewed in this study did not have a large support group, they felt included in things that were occurring around them.

Additionally, Krause (2001) found in his research on social support noted that the elderly adults who are in these supportive but small social groups also have better physical and mental health overall, which is consistent with the current study's findings on elderly people's self reported level of health. In relation, in the current study the majority of participants rated their overall health as good to excellent, and also rated their social group as mostly consisting of their families.

Findings that are unique to this research study are that none of the participants reported having a bad relationship with their family, which can be attributed to the fact that they see their family as their primary source of support. Additionally, this study produced findings that pointed to the fact that not very many elderly people living in assisted living or retirement homes are lonely, however this response could be attributed to a reluctance to discuss something so personal with the interviewer.

Conclusion

The goal of this research study was to analyze the levels of social support that elderly people felt while living in an assisted living/retirement community, specifically Oak Crest in DeKalb, Illinois. The participants were asked a number of questions in an interview setting, and were encouraged to give as much information as they felt comfortable with.

The results of the study indicated that elderly people tend to have smaller but more beneficial social groups, and that their family is the primary source of support for them. For those who did not have children, their siblings tended to be their primary source of support. Additionally, it was found that of all the participants that cited using the telephone as a means of communication with their families spoke with someone from their family at least once a day. All of the residents cited in this research study revealed that they are kept up to date with what is going on in their family's lives, and that they do not feel left out of their lives.

The findings of this research indicates that the primary source of support in an elderly person's life while they are living in a place such as Oak Crest is their family, and the more they interact with their family, the higher their self reported level of health is. The implications of these conclusions will help convince family members of elderly people living in assisted living facilities such as Oak Crest to visit and interact with them frequently. Additionally, due to the fact that baby boomers are reaching retirement age, their concerns and issues need to be given more attention in research. Social agencies can work with families to help make retirement a more productive stage in the life cycle by providing ways for both families and the elderly who reside in assisted living facilities to get involved with and spend time with each other.

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