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“THE GRAVEYARD IS THE BIGGEST NEIGHBOURHOOD”: EXPERIENCE OF AGEING AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE DEPOPULATING VILLAGE OF BANIA, PANAGYURISHTE

Nina Conkova¹, Ajay Bailey²

This paper deals with the experience of ageing, as well as the structure and perceptions on the social network of elderly in the depopulating village of Bania near Panagyurishte. Results show that the process of ageing is perceived rather negatively. The older villagers suffer from multiple problems such as poverty, impaired health combined with low health care quality, and loneliness. The presence of death and several negative stereotypes of older people have also significantly contributed to the negative experience of ageing. The positive features of ageing are the satisfaction of retirement, as well as the joy of caring for children and grandchildren.

The social network size of elderly in Bania is smaller than that of elderly elsewhere. This is especially so in winters, when those living only temporary in the village return to their city lives. The villagers have, though, a strong sense of community, they are well connected and mutually supportive. Adult children, together with spouses, are perceived as the most important source of social support. However, when adult children do not live close by, neighbours have partially overtaken the role of supporting the adult children's parents.

Key words: experience, ageing, social support, social networks, Bania

INTRODUCTION

Ageing in Central and Eastern Europe, in terms of both demographic and societal change, is seen as more difficult than it is in the older member states since it is closely interwoven with the difficult transition to market economy (Botev, 2012; Hoff, 2008; Korinek, 2009; Petrov, 2007; World Bank, 2007). On the one hand, the economic and social upheaval contributed to the so-called demographic crisis in the region, where low fertility and high emigration considerably reinforced the ageing of the population (Hoff, 2007). On the other hand, the collapse of institutions, which had ensured older adults' well-being in the past, led to decreased chances of experiencing the positives of ageing at present (Korinek, 2009).

Building upon the premise that the “experiences of ageing find expression in the set of positive and negative meanings that people attach and ascribe to the process” (Heikkinen, 2004, p. 573), this paper seeks to reveal what are the perceived positive and negative features of becoming older in the depopulating village of Bania near Panagyurishte. Secondly, while bearing in mind that the depopulation process often

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leads to a rupture of social networks (Ni Laoire, 2001), the study aims to examine the structure and perceptions on the social network of elderly in Bania. The research presented here represents one of the first such attempts to explore the ‘lived experiences’ of ageing in rural Bulgaria, and the chosen methodology is for the most part qualitative. The literature review presented below is, however, largely based on quantitative research results, which is a reflection of the excess of quantitative over qualitative ageing research. This excess was noticed as early as 1981, when Cherry Russell argued that researchers failed to “assign a due weight to the perceptions and experiences of elderly people themselves” (p.173). Twenty-six years later she continues to suggest that although the need for people’s views has been better acknowledged now, gerontology still treats older people as an object rather than a subject.

Ageing from a life-course and individual perspective

Within the life-course discourse, ‘being old’ is seen as a stage of life. The individual ageing starts when one is born but begins to develop progressively in the sixties, when retirement as well as many other major physical, psychological and social changes occur (Uhlenberg, 1992). Results from the Eurobarometer survey of late 2011 reveal that 63,9 years is the age when the citizens of the 27 European member states consider themselves as being old (Eurostat, 2012).

According to Lazarus and Lazarus (2006) the features of the individual ageing and the changes that accompanied it can be negative and positive, though no strict distinction between both is really possible. Some of the positives of ageing are the satisfaction of retirement, especially when there is an alternative to work; the joy of caring for children and grandchildren; the potential for making desirable changes in oneself; and the acquired wisdom. On the other hand, some of the negatives of ageing include an increasing awareness of one’s death; the experience of death of family members and friends; an increasing impairment of health; and an increasing intergenerational gap due to social change (Lazarus and Lazarus, 2006).

In Bulgaria, empirical findings reveal a tendency towards a negative portraying of the process of becoming older. Research highlights various problems among elderly, such as poverty, low health care quality, loneliness, and social pessimism. These are separately discussed below.

Poverty

Within the European Union, Bulgaria, along with Latvia, Cyprus and Romania, has one of the highest poverty rates among elderly, as well as the highest proportion of people aged 65 years and over, who experience severe material deprivations (Botev, 2012; Eurostat, 2011). In rural Bulgaria about 40 percent of the pensioners reported that they cannot afford to pay their bills and buy prescribed medicines. Because of insufficient financial means and an irregular transport they have since a long time also desisted from going on vacation or simply to the city to visit their kin (Dobрева, 2005).

Low health care quality

Low income is not the only reason because of which the Bulgarian peasants often remain medically untreated. This problem is deeply rooted in

the paradoxical Bulgarian reality – the smaller the village, the greater the proportion of elderly and the lower the quality of health care (Kojuharova and Dobрева, 2005). Unlike, for example, rural UK, where provision of home care and meals on wheels is comparable with urban areas (Wegner, 2001), in rural Bulgaria it is fortunate if there is even a commuting general practitioner and meals on wheels, and most of the time there is neither a dentist nor a pharmacy (Kojuharova, 2009).

Loneliness

Dykstra (2011) argues that the elderly in Central and Eastern Europe are lonelier than their counterparts in the rest of Europe. Loneliness in Russia and Bulgaria is significantly correlated with widowhood, small family size, and limited contact with family members, as well as with economic deprivation and poor health (Korinek, 2009).

Social pessimism

The current socio-economic status of older people in Bulgaria is in a sharp contrast with what they evaluate as significant for their well-being. Studies conducted in various regions in the country suggest that the value orientations among older people revolve around themes such as health and vitality, family happiness, and wealth (Petrov, 2007; Stoev et al., 2009). In due course, this sharp contrast has resulted in an increasing social pessimism. About 45 percent of the households in the Bulgarian villages are comprised of only pensioners, the majority of whom express a lack of satisfaction with their lives and achievements, as well as a lack of will to go on (Nedelcheva, 2008).

Social support

Social relations are considered to have a positive effect on the individual's health and well-being (Eurostat, 2012; Korinek, 2009; Wegner, 2001). Yet, the nature of social interactions and their effects alter as people move across the life span (Bengston, et al., 2009). When an individual enters the stage of 'being old', a stage that is associated with declining health and less material resources, he or she is more likely to seek support from kith and kin or in other words to rely on social support (Cumming and Hendry, 1961; Wegner, 1997). Social support is divided into five groups, which include emotional aid (e.g. providing an advice), small services (e.g. lending household items), large services (e.g. regular help with housework and long-term health care), financial aid (e.g. providing small or large loans and gifts), and companionship (e.g. doing things together and participating in the same organisation) (Wellman and Worthley, 1990).

It is also argued that the type of support that is provided depends more on the characteristics of the relationships and less on the characteristics of the individuals³ (Wegner, 1997; Wellman and Worthley, 1990). Studies on social support reveal that close kin relationships are strongest and most supportive; bonds that usually provide all types of social support (Wegner and Shahtahmasebi, 1991; Wellman and Worth-

³ The only personal characteristic that directly relates to social support is gender. As a whole, women provide more emotional support and better maintain relations and networks than men (Wegner, 2001).

ley, 1990). Friends provide, on the other hand, emotional support and companionship whereas neighbours, being in a close proximity, offer small services and companionship (Wegner, 1997 and 2011).

Several studies suggest that the size of older people's social network in various regions varies between five and seven (Grundy, 2001; Wegner, 1997). Furthermore, while in the USA and the Netherlands those living in small towns and rural areas tend to have more family members in their social networks, in rural UK and conceivably in rural Bulgaria this is not the case (Wegner, 2001). Wegner (2001) argues that this is the result of migration being more significant determinant of social network composition than rurality is. Finally, similarly to rural UK areas, where older people have more contacts with their neighbours than their urban counterparts (Wegner, 2001), the relationships with neighbours in rural Bulgaria are well manifested. Visiting neighbours or asking them for a favour is a way of living in the Bulgarian villages (Nedelcheva, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the experience of ageing, as well as the structure and perceptions on the social support network in the depopulating village of Bania near Panagyurishte. Given the manifold research objective, a mixed methodology was chosen. Multiple data gathering techniques, called also triangulation, were opted for in order to study the phenomenon of ageing from different angles (Berg, 2001). Under the umbrella of ethnography, participant observations and visual methods were employed to elicit the everyday life of the elderly, and represent the place, in which they are ageing. Pink (2007) argues that photographs cannot represent social structures and emotions, but are a good tool when seeking to represent material environment and enliven the verbal narratives. Participant observations, on the other hand, foster a better understanding of the individual behaviour, cultural norms and social structures (Hennink et al., 2011). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were also carried out in order to examine the participants' perceptions and experiences of ageing and social support. Social support was further studied by means of social network analysis, which allows for a quantitative investigation of the social network structure (Edwards, 2010).

Study location

The village of Bania is a former resort village with a declining population, which is situated 10 km away from the main municipal city Panagyurishte and 40 km from the district capital Pazardzhik in South-central Bulgaria. The village and its vicinity are endowed with both hot springs and copper ore. Because of the copper ore the region is well known for mining. The spring water is considered to have healing properties. Three recreational and medicinal facilities, which were privatized and closed in the years after 1990, made Bania a well known spa village and a perfect place for rehabilitation and medical treatment in the past (Panagyurishte Municipality, 2012). Currently, because of the closure of the recreational and medical facilities the village is experiencing an increased unemployment and a lack of tourism. Unlike other resorts and settlements

named Bania⁴ – which have similar natural surroundings and resources but bigger and younger populations – the village of Bania near Panagyurishte has been in a state of depopulation since 1992. Throughout the years Bania lost about 40 percent of its population reaching only 705 inhabitants in 2011. Over a period of 19 years, Bania's natural increase and net migration were always negative, with natural decrease responsible for more than 50 percent of its depopulation. The age dependency ratio in Bania in 2011 was 72 percent, where the young dependency ratio declined from 18 to 10 percent while the old dependency ratio increased from 38 to 62 percent between 1992 and 2011 (NSI, 2012). These figures lead to a conclusion that Bania's population is ageing at a high pace.

Data collection

The field work of this study took place in August 2011. The recruitment process started with the selection of a focal actor – a woman at the age of 75 – deemed to be a typical representation of an elderly person in Bania.

Name generator survey

The focal actor was interviewed and asked to fill in a name-generator survey⁵. Then, the focal actor's alters⁶ and their alters were tracked down and asked to name the people they most frequently interacted with over the last six months. Questions about the type and duration of the relationships were also asked. The process of tracking down alters discontinued when the field work period was over. All alters residing in Bania were contacted personally whereas alters living outside the village were contacted by phone. Regrettably, indirect contact resulted in a higher non-response rate and about 20 people had to be removed from the social network dataset. The total number of actors in the social network analysis dataset, which was created for this study, is 105. The actors reside either in Bania or in the close by villages and cities, and their age ranges between 5 and 89 years.

In-depth interviews

Several alters were also recruited for in-depth interviews. The selection criteria were permanent residency in Bania, age of 60 years and over, being retired, and gender. In total 20 interviews, with duration between half an hour and one and a half hours, were conducted. Three of the interviews were conducted with families (spouses were interviewed together) and two were carried out with key informants, whose profession is kept secret for the purpose of confidentiality. The remaining 15 interviewees were 10 women and 5 men ranging in age from 60 to 89. Furthermore, the participants varied in their socio-demographic backgrounds. While some of interviewees have been residing in Bania their entire lives, others moved

⁴ There are a number of villages named Bania in Bulgaria. Such are, for example, the village of Bania near Pazlog (2857 inhabitants, old age dependency ratio of 22 percent) and near Nova Zagora (1479 inhabitants, old age dependency ratio of 12,5 percent) (NSI, 2012).

⁵ The name-generator survey is a standard method to enumerate networks and describe network structure and characteristics (Marin and Hampton, 2006).

⁶ The persons who have been named in a name-generation survey are called alters.

to the village only after they had retired. Second, all of the participants lived in one or two person households except of four interviewees, who co-resided with adult children and grandchildren. In addition, two of the participants reported to have decayed relationship with their children and another three shared that their children live abroad. With regard to marital status, one participant was never married, one male and five females were widowed and all others were married.

Participant observations and visual methods

Participant observations were carried out through participating in the older people's daily life by, for example, visiting them, sharing meals and coffees, as well as by sitting with them outside their homes. Additionally, the researcher often strolled in the village in order to explore the physical environment. Notes about the most important and interesting observations were written during the day while field diaries were written in the evenings. Besides, photographs aimed to imprint these most important observations were taken. Several of the photographs were also taken because of the participants' narratives and exhortations to look around and see, for example, the empty houses, overgrown with bushes front doors and pedestrian paths, and the left to ruin empty buildings of schools and shops.

Data analysis

The verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, the field diaries and the photographs were analyzed with Maxqda™ software (version 10)⁷. Segments of the texts and photographs were coded with inductive codes (stemming from the data), in-vivo codes (using participants' words as codes) and deductive codes (stemming from the theory). Once the coding process was finalised, the codes were grouped into categories and concepts. The latter are used to structure the results chapter and present the findings.

The data collected by means of a name-generator survey were entered into UCINET (version 6), a computer-assisted software program for the analysis of social networks and other proximity data. UCINET allows for data entry and manipulation; visualisation of social networks, descriptive and procedure-based analysis (Huisman and van Duijn, 2005). As UCINET is matrix oriented, all ties were entered into a matrix where existing ties between actors were coded 1 and non-existing ties 0. Because the focus of this paper is on elderly people, a shortened version of the network was also created. The shortened dataset consists of only elderly people aged 60 years and over, from whom only 3 actors are in employment. Both datasets were used for the calculation of descriptive measures such as density, degree, geodesic distance, reciprocity, centralization index, and number of cliques⁸, and for testing differences between groups of actors.

⁷ Maxqda™ is a professional software for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis. It is appropriate for textually based case study research. It provides a means of organizing multiple data sources into one file and offers multiple ways to analyze and manage data (Humble, 2010).

⁸ In this paper it is looked only at measures, which are meaningful at the macro level. Measures that provide information at the micro level will not be discussed because of confidentially reasons.

RESULTS

This chapter presents the main results of the study. It is structured in accordance with the concepts derived from the data analysis and the aforementioned literature review.

The onset of ageing

The older people in Bania perceive ageing as a long-lasting process, which however has an onset marked by retirement, impairment of health, which leads to the inability to work and perform everyday duties, the moment when one gives up the will to live, and when one has to take care of grandchildren. While the first three markers of the ageing process were named by participants from both genders, the last was only reported by female interviewees.

“Well, I felt that I am getting older after 50 years old. Around this time I started looking after my grandchildren too. And since then I am older”. (Woman, 89 years old, lives in five person household)

Perceived negative features of ageing

The older inhabitants of Bania seem to experience many problems because of which they defined ageing as bad, difficult and even as a deadly disease.

“Ageing is something negative. I read in the newspaper today that to be old is a disease. But...it is such – deadly disease”. (Man, 79 years old, lives in two person household)

As discussed in the introduction chapter, most significant problems among elderly people in Bulgaria are poverty, impaired health in combination with low health care quality, loneliness, and social pessimism. These were also identified by the older residents in Bania, with highest importance given to the lack of money.

“Now, with this way of living...the lack of money...one does not think so much about being sick as about the lack of money. And this is because when you get sick you need money to go to the doctor. But when there is no money...?” (Woman, 74 years old, lives in one person household)

The experience of poverty among Bania’s elderly has led to many deprivations such as, for example, buying medicines and clothes, and going on vacation.

Case study: Poverty and Deprivations

Georgi (not his real name) is a 67 years old man who lives with his wife, son and grandson. His daughter and her family live in the municipal city of Panagyurishte. Georgi, like most male residents in Bania, was a miner and receive a higher than the average pension in Bulgaria, but he, however, revealed a feeling of poverty. This feeling seems to be determined by a very low household income owing to the low pension of Georgi’s wife and the unemployment status of his son. Consequently, Georgi’s pension is used to cover most of the household’s expenses while he said to have personal expenses of only 3.60 levs per month.

When asked what he buys with the money, Georgi answered: “*a bus ticket to Panagyurishte.*” Georgi added that he is helping with the renovation of his daughter’s house and therefore two, three times a month he travels to the city. Georgi and his wife narrated that they are in good health, which allows them to produce most of the food they consume. With regard to other expenses, Georgi said:

“We do not buy clothes, nothing. What we have from before, that is what we wear. (...) We are not used to buying cloths anymore, I do not feel like, I do not go anywhere. Thus, I do not need new cloths. If I go to the bath or to Panagyurishte, I put on some trousers. Otherwise I am always like this – with the rags.”

Another problem of ageing that the participants frequently mentioned is their impairing health in combination with low health care quality. The overall health state of the residents in Bania was described as “*very bad*” and even “*tragic.*” They also often expressed dissatisfaction with the competences of the commuting general practitioner in Bania.

“Nobody is satisfied with him [the general practitioner]! I am not satisfied too because he is not kind, he is a rough man. The doctor has to be courteous, to give courage to the ill people. Not to say that he is often drunk and when there when not. Simply, I am not satisfied!” (Woman, 75 years old, lives in one person household)

As suggested by previous studies, the perception of being ill is in a sharp contrast with the participants’ belief that to be healthy and independent is the most positive feature of ageing.

“Well, [the most important thing for me is] to be healthy (...) But if one is ill, what is the difference...there is no need to live and to be ill and to torture yourself... and to torture your family.” (Woman, 89 years old, lives in five persons household)

The quote above reveals a rather pessimistic attitude to life, which has been further expressed by some of the participants, mainly living in one or two person households. They stated that there is nothing positive in life and nothing to dream about, as well as that living is not worth and therefore they need not take care of themselves any longer.

“But until...60 years old I had self-confidence, I had family and I had something to do. Now...I do not have self-confidence anymore, I do not feel like [doing anything] and simply I do not feel like living. I do not want to live, it is not worth.” (Woman, 64 years old, lives in one person household)

A negative feature of the ageing process experienced by the elderly in Bania but not previously discussed by Bulgarian scholars is the experience of death. In the village of Bania death has become part of the residents’ everyday life. There is a general perception that the old people are “*dying out as flies,*” which in the course of time led to the transformation of the graveyard into “*the biggest neighbourhood in the village.*” Furthermore, the occurrence of death is always signified by the ring of the church bell, which the participants stated to hear at least once a week, as well as by the many obituaries distributed along the streets (see photographs 1 and 2).



Photograph 1. Obituaries on an empty house



Photograph 2. Obituaries on the main bus stop

It is unknown when and why the tradition of distributing obituaries started in Bulgaria but Vasileva (2001) claims that at present this tradition is used to ensure immortality of the deceased. Other opinions⁹ regard the distribution of obituaries as mirroring the Eastern Orthodox religion and the belief that Bulgarian society is rather negative (Blog of Longanlon, 2012).

Death of family members and friends, and the out-migration/emigration process in Bania has led to the experience of loneliness. According to Nedelcheva (2005) loneliness in the Bulgarian villages is experienced at much younger age than in the cities because the children have since a long time left not only the village but also the country. The narratives of the participants revealed that the village of Bania is not an exception from this trend.

“The people in Bania are lonely. They have nothing to do...it is hard for the people, especially for the women, who live alone. Here in the village men die younger and women remain alone. Their children are far away...it is hard.” (Key informant)

A startling finding of this study is that loneliness is not only typical of the widows and the residents, whose families have either out-migrated or emigrated, but also of some of the elderly, whose families are still residing in the village. Among them the perception of loneliness is reinforced by a feeling of being superfluous and a burden for one's family.

“When my grandchildren were younger it was different. But now...now grandma is not needed. I have looked after them a lot, they grew here. But now they hardly come...now I am alone. (...) But I don't go either. They [the children] have been working the whole day; I cannot go there and sit. And what shall I do? Wait to get a dish? No, I prefer to cook for myself, and to eat peppers and tomatoes with white cheese than to go and eat in a foreign house.” (Woman, 71 years old, lives in one person household)

⁹ In Bulgaria literature on the topic of distributing obituaries is scarce, making the discussion difficult and up to the first author's cultural knowledge, and ideas found on the internet.

Towards a more positive perception of ageing

The positive features of ageing which the interviewees discussed are the joy of caring for children and grandchildren and seeing them succeed in life, as well as the satisfaction of retirement. While the latter was mentioned by all participants, the former feature was predominantly revealed by female elderly, who still have regular contact with their close family members. With regard to retirement, the participants explained that they had impatiently waited to retire because they felt tired from working and commuting, as well as because they expected to have more leisure time, and to be independent when organizing their time.

“I impatiently waited to retire. Really! And I was so happy that retirement is coming. (...) Because the last years before retirement the women are in such age that...I was working in three shifts and I could not relax at all. I was tired and I felt that I have no strength left.” (Woman, 67 years old, lives in two person household)

Social Support

Social support is a complex concept, which in order to be well understood, requires to be examined from different angles. This paper discusses two of the components of social support in Bania, namely the existence of relationships in the village's network and their characteristics (network's structure), as well as the meaning given to the present social ties (perceptions on network).

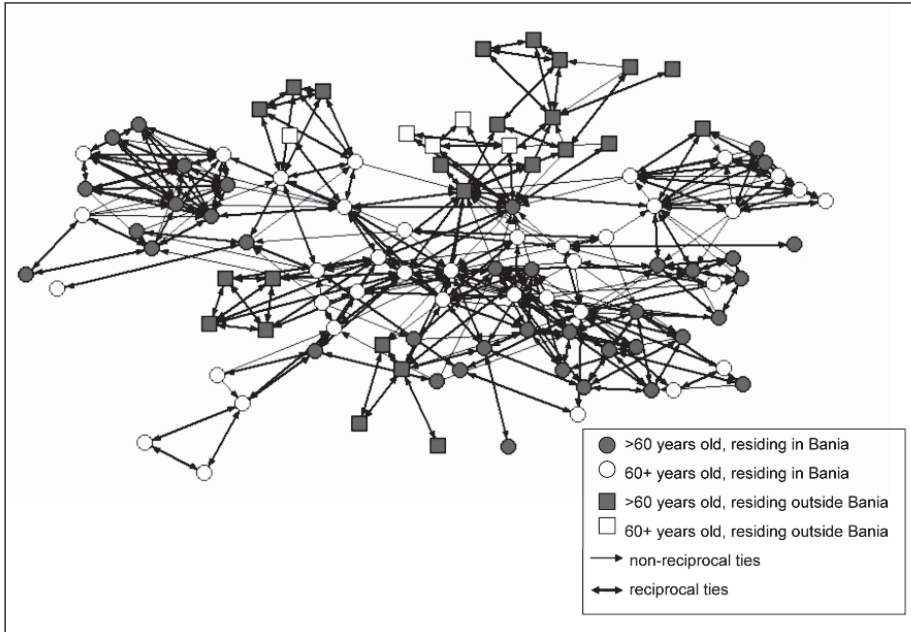
Social network structure

At first glance, as it can be seen in socio-gram 1, the actors in the complete network are well connected with no people who are isolated from the others. This is, however, not the case when the younger actors are excluded. By looking at socio-gram 2, one can see that there are two female elderly, who are disconnected from the other actors. This difference suggests that the younger actors in the network are essential for the complete connectedness between the residents in the village of Bania.

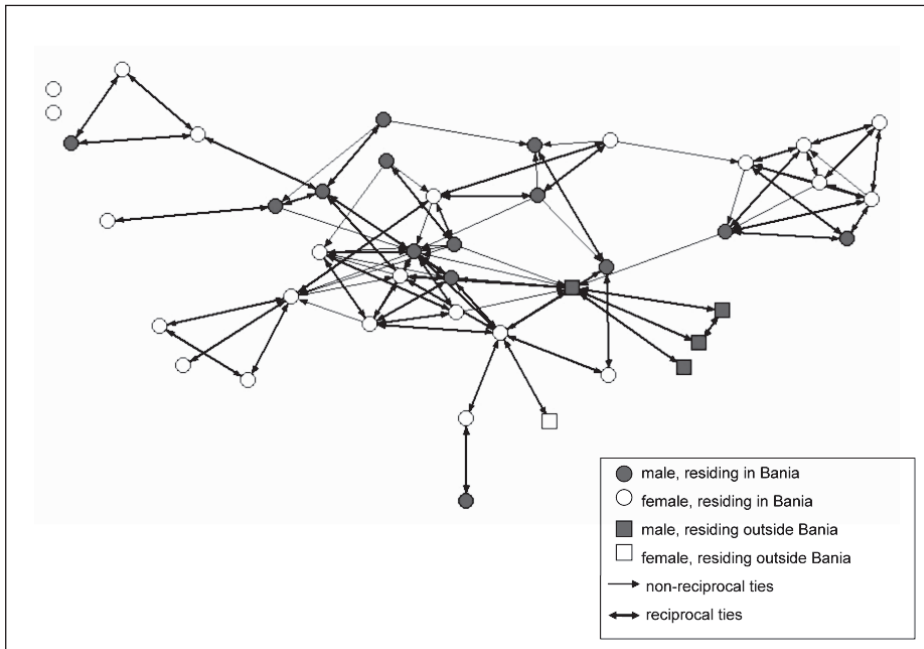
Second, the socio-grams demonstrate that both networks are fairly reciprocated and have visible network neighbourhoods at the periphery. Third, the fact that most of the actors in the complete network who reside outside Bania are younger than 60 years implies that the older villagers' interaction outside the village is mainly with their adult children, who have out-migrated.

To begin with the descriptive measures, the density of the complete sample social network in the village of Bania is 0,0517, which means that 5,2 percent of all possible ties in the studied network are actually present. Testing this value against a theoretical parameter¹⁰, allows concluding about the reliability of the observations (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005). The density value of the complete sample network is significant at 0,01 percent (Z-score 7,6) suggesting that it is very likely to observe a similar proportion of actual ties in any random sample of the same population.

¹⁰ The performed test is a t-test against a theoretical parameter. The theoretical parameters are usually 0 (network density is 0) and 1 (network density is 1).



Socio-gram 1. Complete network in the village of Bania



Socio-gram 2. Shortened network in the village of Bania

The average degree¹¹ is a derivative measure of the density and provides information on the average number of ties between actors. The greater is the number of ties between individuals the better is the access to resources and the more are the alternative ways to satisfy one's needs (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005). The average degree of an actor in the complete (asymmetric) sample network is 5,4, which is fairly low given that there are 104 other outgoing ties or people who have been named¹². When the shortened version of the sample network is considered, the average degree decreases even more and reaches 3,5. This number suggests that the elderly residents in Bania rely on a small number of people compared to all available when looking for social support. The rather low number of connections a person maintains could be well clarified by the participants' perception that there are few people left in Bania with whom they can interact.

"There is no one to meet, there are no people. (...) There are almost no friends and neighbours. As you can see on this street – from the old school until the end of the village over there (pointing the opposite end of the street) – on that side live 4 people and on the other 5." (Man, 76 years old, lives in two person households)

The provision of social support depends, furthermore, on the closeness between actors. This is analysed by a geodesic distance¹³, which tells about the number of steps the individuals are from each other. In the village of Bania the actors are at a moderately short distance from each other as the average geodesic distance is 3,6. This means that a random person in the studied network will be able to reach anybody else within four steps when seeking or providing social support from/to another person.

Like most social networks, the studied network is asymmetric. Its reciprocity¹⁴ is 69,2 percent and implies that the people in this network are fairly mutually supportive to each other and are both givers and receivers. The mutual support is well experienced by the participants, who described the people in the village as united and ready to help each other if needed.

"Here...yes, there are quarrels...we needle and hate each other; but here in the villages, if something happens, if one is in need, we will help each other. Here, we have always been on friendly terms." (Man, 67 years old, lives in four person household)

The emphasis on "here" or the local (rural) context in the quote above and the fact that not all actors in the sample network reside in Bania call into question whether there is a difference in the extent to which people with different place of residence are mutually supportive to each other. In order to answer this question the hypothesis that there are no significant differences in the means of reciprocal ties between people residing in Bania and elsewhere¹⁵ has been tested. This has been done by means of an

¹¹ The average degree equals the density multiplied by the number of actors in the network minus one (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005).

¹² The average degree of an actor in the network, if symmetric, is 6.4. This is however more imprecise way of measuring average degree because it assumes that all ties are reciprocal.

¹³ The geodesic distance is the number of relations in the shortest possible walk from one actor to another. A walk is a sequence of actors and relations that begins and ends with actors (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005).

¹⁴ Reciprocity is a measure which indicates the proportion of reciprocal ties relative to the number of all actual ties Hanneman and Riddle, 2005).

¹⁵ Everybody who falls into the category "elsewhere" is an urban resident. There was a small number of people residing in rural areas different than Bania but they have been excluded from this test.

independent t-test under the assumption that all present ties are reciprocal. The performed t-test is significant at 0,01 percent and suggests that the inhabitants of Bania have significantly higher proportion of reciprocal ties and are thus more mutually supportive to each other than their urban counterparts.

The social network in Bania is a rather decentralised network. The centralisation index¹⁶ equals 26,4 percent and indicates a little variation between the number of links an individual possesses. When examining this variation more in-depth by looking at the micro level, it becomes palpable that the most central actors are the people who facilitated the data collection at the most. In order to control for this data collection bias, these people have been excluded from the analysis. As a result the centralisation index has decreased to 19,8 percent, a number suggesting that the studied network is indeed not revolving around certain actors. In other words, there are no people who control the flow of resources in Bania.

The actors in a social network are non-randomly connected and therefore one of the major concerns of the social network analysis is the identification of sub-groups or cliques. Cliques are sets of actors, where each actor is strongly and directly connected to everybody else and hence they have a density of 1. Collins (cited by Wasserman and Faust, 1994, p.251) argues that since “cliques are highly cohesive groups, the individuals within these groups tend to also have very homogenous beliefs” and hence they are expected to be alike in their behaviours. In the shortened version of the network in Bania there are 13 cliques with each three actors being directly and strongly related to each other, and all sub-groups consist chiefly of spouses and neighbours. These findings imply that the exchange of social support among the elderly in the village occurs for the most part within the neighbourhood. This argument could again be explained qualitatively in view of the fact that the older interviewees reported to rarely go outside of their neighbourhood because of impaired health, leading to the inability to walk long distances.

“Question: Do you interact with other people from the village except for the neighbours you have already mentioned?”

Answer: Look, we can't go anywhere. I personally can't walk [well]. My movement is to go to the shop and come back, and once a month to pick up my pension.” (Man, 76 years old, lives in two person household)

Types and perceived importance of social support

In the context of the village of Bania, where depopulation is prevailing, all five types of social support were mentioned and highlighted as important for managing one's life. Yet, as the participants differ in their socio-economic backgrounds and needs, they emphasised different sources and types of social support as most important.

To begin with, **companionship** was evaluated as a very important type of social support by all participants, with an exception of a few interviewees, who showed reluctance to communicate with other inhabitants in Bania for several reasons: their perception of being “dotty”, gossiping, or because of decreased importance of social contacts.

¹⁶ A centralisation index measures the extent to which a graph is a star graph – there is one central node with the remaining nodes considerably less central. For more details on star graph refer to Hanneman and Riddle (2005).

“I do not feel like communicating with the people... (pause)...I simply do not want to communicate. (...) I tried but I realised that they only take advantage of me. And if something small happens they go and gossip. I do not like that. There is no need for it!” (Woman, 64 years old, lives in one person household).

Among the other participants the companionship provided by friends and neighbours is perceived as an essential element in one’s life because it is seen as a way to prevent loneliness and diversify the everyday life.

“Well, it is very important to meet friends because one can maintain connections with people and not isolate oneself. I can’t imagine my life without them. We are so used to each other. Without them we will be very secluded and lonely. I can’t and don’t want to imagine my life without them.” (Woman, 64 years old, lives in two person household)

Within the family, a particularly strong stress was laid on the importance of the spouse’s companionship. The spouse in the village of Bania is seen as the closest person, and like friends and neighbours, he/she is essential in withering the feeling of loneliness.

“For me, my grandma¹⁷ is most important. (...) I need her to be my company. I can support her financially... but I need her for company, to have somebody to chat with. I have told her that if it happens that I remain after her, I will go in an elderly home. I do not want to stay alone at home.” (Man, 76 years old, lives in two person household)

With regard to the places where socialisation occurs, the participants most often mentioned the home and the street, and to a lesser extent other public spaces such as the bath, the shop, the coffee shop, and the graveyard. The home is a place where the elderly in Bania meet with their friends and neighbours on a daily basis in order to spend free time together by, for example, having a chat, drinking coffee, or watching TV. The street, on the other hand, is a place where the elderly organise working bee gatherings¹⁸ (see photograph 3). The organisation of working bee gatherings is a Bulgarian custom with a very long history. However, the meaning of these gatherings has been changing with the passage of time. At the beginning of their existence the working bee gatherings were occasions for young and old to sit together in the neighbourhood and perform work such as spinning, husk corn or thread tobacco on the strings for drying. In the 19th century the working bee gatherings were mainly attended by young single Bulgarians, who were looking for a potential mate (MacDermott, 1998). Nowadays, the working bee gatherings are mainly visited by elderly people, who see them as a good opportunity to socialise and discuss their hobbies (such as for example gardening and knitting), everyday life, politics, and to share their problems and past.

“We gather every evening on the bench (smile). We organize senile working bee gatherings. (...) Every evening we are certainly having a working bee gathering, without making an appointment, we go out and talk about who has done what during the day, about what we have cooked, what we have eaten, sometimes we discuss the

¹⁷ In Bulgaria older people frequently use the term ‘my grandma/grandpa’ instead of ‘my wife/husband’ when referring to their spouse.

¹⁸ Called “sedyanki” in Bulgarian.



Photograph 3. A place where working bee gatherings are organised

politics, sometimes the past...It depends on the mood.” (Man, 86 years old, lives in two person household)

Finally, a distinctive finding of this study is that there is a strong seasonal influence on the perception of number of people and possibilities for social interaction. A lack of people is much more strongly experienced during winters, when those who reside only temporarily in the village return to their city lives. According to a local lady, whom the researcher met in the coffee shop in Bania, there are no more than 250-300 people, who remain in the village in the winter time. Another interviewee said:

“It is very hard to live here. Especially during winters. Now, it is still good, it is different during summers. Look, Vania has come again, other people come too and we can meet with them. But in the winter, they are gone and our encirclement is very closed. We stay mainly at home and every day is the same – housework and boredom.” (Woman, 60 years old, lives in four person household)

Regarding **emotional aid** in the village of Bania, most of the participants highlighted the emotional support received from their closest kin as most important. In particular, the interviewees appear to largely rely on their spouses and adult children.

“I share things with my daughter, with whom else could I share personal issues? Yes, mainly with her. (...) We discuss everything with her, small problems, mood, health problems...simply everything.” (Women, 67 years old, lives in two person household)

Siblings and their children were also given as a source of emotional support but only by unmarried participants. The interviewees most frequently turn to their brothers and sisters when in need to share and discuss personal problems. Additionally, while some of the male participants uttered that their confidants are friends and neighbours, some of the female interviewees expressed unwillingness to seek any kind

of emotional support. The latter group named two barriers to confiding, namely the perceived lack of close people and the belief that they are a burden for their families.

*“The personal problems I keep for myself. I do not share them, I tell them to myself at home. When I do not feel fine, I cry a little at home and I feel better then. And that is it! **Question:** It is painful to keep problems in yourself; don’t you think your family and friends might be willing to support you in such situations? **Answer:** No, no...I do not want to tell my children...to burden them only. Why should I burden them, it is not worth!” (Woman, 71 years old, lives in one person household)*

Similarly to emotional support, some of the interviewees revealed that they do not seek **financial support**. These participants explained that they do not borrow money, firstly as a matter of principle, and secondly because the residents in Bania do not have sufficient financial means and thus there are not many people whom to borrow money from.

“Look, we are trying not to borrow money. We are planning our money carefully, so that we can cover our expenses. We don’t want to burden other people.(...). I do not ask anybody, I feel uncomfortable because the people do not have money on their own.” (Woman, 60 years old, lives in four person household)

However, when a hypothetical situation was considered, the interviewees most often mentioned their adult children and neighbours as a potential source of financial aid. Adult children and neighbours, along with spouses and friends, were also given as a source of financial support by those, who said to borrow money. With regard to the latter sources of financial support the participants revealed gender differences: spouses were mentioned only by female participants while friends were named only by male interviewees.

“If he [my husband] is not with me, it will be very bad. My money finishes for less than two weeks. And if it is not him to give...from where should I take them otherwise? (Woman, 62 years old, lives in four person household)

Family members and neighbours are also seen by the interviewees as providers of support when **small services** are considered. Neighbours – being the people in a closest proximity – are most frequently asked to take care of one’s house in case one needs to travel, and to help with everyday duties such as, for example, gardening and preparation of winter supplies. When adult children live far away, neighbours are also asked for support with transport and supply of food, and sometimes medicines. The participants also revealed that they often engage in exchange of self produced food and seedling with their neighbours.

“We have two neighbours, who live just down there (pointing a perpendicular street). And we try to help each other as much as possible. They help us with the car, when we need to go somewhere. We, on the other hand, help them with gardening. Our neighbour is handicap and we try to help him with what we can – mainly with physical work, with watering and hoeing his garden for example. We respect and help each other in the daily life.” (Man, 86 years old, lives in two person household)

What concerns **large services**, the participants mentioned only closest kin as a source of support. In this regard, adult children provide predominantly long-term care and renovate their parents’ house when needed.

“My children help me a lot. They carry in my wood for the winter; they carry our repairs when needed. They help me with all the heavy work I can’t manage alone.” (Woman, 71 years old, lives in one person household)

DISCUSSION

It is the authors of the Road Map for European Ageing Research report who claim that the European Union is facing an unprecedented demographic challenge – ageing – to which countries will need to respond in an innovative and sustainable way. We argue that in order to ensure successful coping strategies, which will cushion the negative consequences of this phenomenon in a way that the demands of elderly are also met, we need a qualitative investigation of their experiences, problems, and gains from the ageing process. This research has been undertaken with the purpose to examine what are the positive and negative features of the process of becoming older, as well as to provide insight into the structure and perceptions on the social support network in the depopulating village of Bania near Panagyurishte. The study confirms most of the previous findings of ageing research, but also brings in-depth and documents several locally determined specifics.

The study results substantiate that the individual ageing in rural Bulgaria is a process typified by both positive and negative experiences. However, the great prevalence of bad experiences, which were revealed by the participants, implies that the tendency towards a negative portraying of the ageing in the country is not unjustified.

The negative evaluation of the ageing process is marked by poverty, loneliness, negative stereotypes, and social pessimism among others. In conjunction with previous studies, poverty is perceived as one of the most serious problems among Bania's elderly and leads to many material deprivations. Furthermore, a combination of impaired health and low health care quality has led to high mortality, which is well sensed by the inhabitants of Bania. Death has a strong presence in their everyday life, as well as in the physical environment of the village. Reduced social interaction because of death of kith and kin, outward migration and emigration, decreased importance of social relations, gossiping, and self-perceptions of being dotty, superfluous and a burden for one's family, has, furthermore, led to the experience of loneliness. A noteworthy finding of this study is that loneliness is not only experienced among those living alone and having their families far away, but also among residents, whose families still reside in Bania.

The main positive features of ageing, which were revealed by the older inhabitants of Bania, are the joy of caring for children and grandchildren, as well as the satisfaction of retirement. Whereas the latter is a common experience in the village, the former is an experience, which is most typical of elderly, who maintain a close and frequent contact with their adult children.

With regard to social support, it was revealed that the size of the older people's social network in the village of Bania is four and is thus slightly smaller than the common size of five to seven proposed by Grundy (2001) and Wegner (1997). This finding could be explained with both – the depopulation process and the seasonal influence on the number of people in Bania. The inhabitants of Bania are, however, well connected and at a moderately short distance from each other. It is though worth noting that younger people are essential for the complete connectedness between the older inhabitants. Furthermore, the residents in Bania seem to be more mutually supportive to each other than their urban counterparts, and experience a strong sense of community.

In line with previous findings, spouses and adult children were regarded as most important sources of social support. Spouses have been named as providers of all

types of social support whereas adult children have been mainly mentioned when considering instrumental, emotional and financial support but not companionship. Furthermore, because adult children often live outside the village of Bania and sometimes even outside the country, de facto they provide less social support than it is actually suggested by previous findings. Neighbours, on the other hand, are strongly and directly connected, and most frequently provide companionship, help with small services, and sometimes financial support.

In conclusion it can be said that the problems leading to negative experiences of the ageing process in the village of Bania remind on the main markers of the *culture of poverty* described by Lewis (1971). This concept, the author claims, embraces not only the physical poverty but also feelings of marginality, self-helplessness, dependency, personal unworthiness, resignation and pessimism. Lewis also argues “that the elimination of physical poverty as such might not be enough to eliminate the culture of poverty, which is a whole way of life” (p.22). The authors of this paper thus recommend that measures meant to fight negative stereotypes and thus decrease in social interaction, and loneliness should be undertaken simultaneously with reforms targeted at eradicating poverty and reforming health care. There is an urgent need for changes in attitudes towards the elderly, and mass media and education could be a good means to achieve these changes.

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„ГРОБИЩАТА НИ СА НАЙ-ГОЛЯМАТА МАХАЛА“: ВЪЗПРИЯТИЯ ЗА СТАРОСТТА И СОЦИАЛНАТА ПОДКРЕПА В ДЕПОПУЛИРАЩОТО СЕ СЕЛО БАНЯ, ОБЩИНА ПАНАГЮРИЩЕ

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Резюме

Тази статия разглежда възприятията, които са свързани с процеса на остаряване, както и със структурата, и значението на социалната мрежа в село Баня, община Панагюрище. Позовавайки се на комбинация от количествени и качествени методи, изследването показва, че възрастните хора в село Баня възприемат остаряването значително негативно. Те страдат от многобройни проблеми като например бедност, влошено здраве в комбинация с ниско качество на здравното обслужване и самота. Към негативното изживяване на процеса на остаряване допринасят също така силното присъствие на смъртта и няколко негативни стереотипи, свързани с възрастните хора. Позитивите от процеса на остаряване в село Баня са удовлетворението от пенсионирането и радостта от възможността на възрастните хора да се грижат за своите деца и внуци.

Размерът на социалната мрежа на възрастните хора в село Баня е по-малък от размера на социалните мрежи на възрастните хора в други краища на света. Този факт е особено валиден през зимата, когато тези, които живеят само временно в село Баня, се завръщат към градския си живот. Въпреки това хората в селото имат силно чувство за единност, те са здраво свързани и взаимно се подкрепят. Най-важните източници на социална подкрепа в селото са децата и съпрузите. Но тъй като децата често живеят далече от родителите си, съседите са тези, които всъщност изпълняват ролята на източник на социална подкрепа.

Ключови думи: възприятия, стареене, социална подкрепа, социална мрежа, село Баня