



SCIREA Journal of Sociology

ISSN: 2994-9343

<http://www.scirea.org/journal/Sociology>

June 1, 2025

Volume 9, Issue 3, June 2025

<https://doi.org/10.54647/sociology841442>

New social constructs in support of active ageing of older people in post-socialist societies

Vyara Tsvetanova ¹, Mirela Kyuchukova ²

¹ South–West University „Neofit Rilski“, Department of Pedagogy, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

E-mail: viara23@swu.bg, ORCID: 0000-0003-4817-570

²Southwest University "Neofit Rilski", Department of "Social Pedagogy" , Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, str. Ivan Mihaylov 66, Post Code 2700

E-mail: m.kuchukova@swu.bg ORCID: 0000-0003-1376-6358

Anotation: In the context of the increasing aging of the population it is important to look for new opportunities to stimulate the active aging. In former socialist countries, this process is complicated by the specific characteristics of the elderly population, whose education and socialization at a young age was shaped by totalitarian ideology. New social constructs like a voluntary initiatives offer interesting opportunities, which motivate older people to rediscover the role of the community. The present field study of a volunteer kitchen for the poor allowed us to describe the main characteristics of the elderly people who use the kitchen and to compare their perception of support and cooperation with the elderly volunteers. The research confirmed our hypothesis that emerging social constructs based on volunteering in the local community activate the elderly to participate in social life.

Keywords: elderly, active ageing, volunteering, micro-community, postsocialism

Introduction

Modern European society, is ageing; according to the European Commission (EC), by 2070, 30%, or one third of the population, is expected to be 65 or older (compared to 20% in 2019) and 13% is expected to be 80 or older (compared to 6% in 2019) (Petrova 2021, 7). Bulgarian society is one of the oldest in Europe, and there are many reasons for this: economic, political, social, constant migration. According to the National Statistical Institute, by the end of 2022 the population of Bulgaria will be just over 6 million 447 thousand people. The figures show that older Bulgarians make up almost a third - 28.3%, with the largest share of people aged 65 to 69 - 7%, followed by people in the 55-59 age group - 6.8%, and those aged 70 to 74 - 6.6%. A decrease in the percentage is observed between the ages of 80 and 84 - 2.9%, while the percentage of people over 75 is almost 5% (NSI 2023).

One-fifth of the country's adult population consists of people, who were socially and economically active during the totalitarian communist regime. The dramatic changes after the fall of the regime and the new social and economic rules affect the personal and family life of each of them and have a serious impact on their active aging. There are separate groups of elderly people, with specific problems and abilities to carry out work and social activity opportunities for activities. Economic realities further widen the gap between rich and poor older people and further their social exclusion.

Theory

Social constructs

In the research, we assume that the interaction between volunteers and users leads to the formation of a new social construct, that motivates the elderly for active aging. This hypothesis requires us to define the term social construct. A social constructs are of an abstract nature, "they are neither the objects of reference nor representation themselves, they are presented by enumerating relevant aspects, rules, graphs, pictures, databases (von Braun et al. 2000). According to the author, a social construct is a collection of aspects that make up a given concept in the real or imagined world. A social constructs have shared understanding, rules, and linguistic communication.

According to Hacking, three types of things can be considered socially constructed: ideas, objects, and a group of words that arise, as a result of semantic ascent—truth, facts, reality

(Hacking 1999). Berger and Lukman write that in reality any body of knowledge is established, and the processes by which this is accomplished is the subject of the sociology of knowledge and is directly related to social construction (Berger, P., Lukman, T. 1996). The reality of volunteers and users, created by subjective meanings, requires an examination of the way in which this reality is constructed. This understanding is important for understanding its role in the active aging of the elderly in the construct.

A similar construct is volunteering, which Hard and Sulik write is "a complex of motives, commitments and actions that occur in an environment shaped by social institutions (church, schools, community groups)" (Hard, Sulik 2014). Various factors such as volunteers' motivations, types of actions, the institution and others influence the social construction of volunteering.

In the present study, we look for social constructs that include in addition to volunteers and users. Certain connections, communication, language, rules and others are created between them, which determine the socio-constructive character of the formed micro-community. It is influenced by the individual elements characterizing the participants. In this study, we will pay attention to the specificity of the elderly in the construct, who have psycho-social characteristics influenced by the totalitarian regime in which they lived and is directly related to their active old age.

Index of Active Aging and Volunteering

To describe the construct, we will use data collected based on the Active Aging Index determined by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). It summarizes information on good health, independence, safe living, employment and social interaction, as well as the need for an environment and capacity for the development of older people. The Active Aging Index (AAI) includes 22 indicators grouped into four groups and measures the potential of older people (aged 55 and over) in terms of their ability to contribute to the economy and society (Murgova 2019).

The second set of indicators measures adults' participation in unpaid community activities in two ways: family care (for one's own children, grandchildren and elderly) and social activism (volunteering and political activity). As the paper itself points out, this contribution to active ageing is underestimated and measures need to be taken to create more favourable conditions for it (European Centre Vienna (2013)).

For our study, this part of the paper is important because it reflects the social activity of older people in different cultures and social settings. In particular, the indicator 'volunteering' (UNECE, 2018) is central to our study and is related to 'non-market free productive activities offered as volunteering', but does not include activities carried out outside voluntary organisations. This underestimates the contribution of small-scale community volunteering initiatives. The definition of the indicator specifies the eligibility criteria: persons aged 55 and over who have done unpaid voluntary work through an organisation at least once a week in the last 12 months. It also specifies the type of organisations: 'helping the elderly, young people, people with disabilities or other people in need, educational, cultural, sports or professional associations, social, charitable movements and other organisations' (UNECE 2018).

Countries across Europe vary widely on this indicator, with scores above 15% reported in 2018 for countries such as the Netherlands (25.2), Denmark (20.8), Sweden (18.6), Austria (17.8), Luxembourg (16.3) and Belgium (14.08). Values below 2% are also observed: Hungary (1.00), Czech Republic (1.6), Slovakia (1.5), Bulgaria (1.7), Greece (1.7) (Murgova, 2019). Some of these countries (as well as others with a low index, such as Romania) are former socialist republics, with the exception of Greece, where the main volunteering takes place within the structure of the Greek Orthodox Church. It is possible to look for common reasons for these results, as well as specificities of the adult population linked to totalitarian regimes, which cut across social and personal development areas.

In this paper we will mainly talk about the Bulgarian society that we know, study and belong to, but the conclusions drawn here can also be applied to other post-socialist societies of today's European family (Romania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) and beyond (Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, etc.).

Older people and community in changing societies

A number of authors have written on the issue of ageing in the context of social development and intergenerational relations, both in Bulgaria (D. Koleva, K. Popova, N. Galabova, S. Balutsova, I. Eftimova, V. Decheva, V. Nozharova, N. Vukov, V. Voskresensky, G. Goncharova, T. Karamelska, M. Murgova, P. Naydenova, G. Mihova, M. Zaikova, K. Bozhikov, A. Trifonov, S. Cherkezova, M. Mizov, Y. Dimitrov, R. Rangelova, V. Zlatanova, T. Kineva, etc.) and abroad (Mannheim, Riley, Cavalli, Hirsch, M., etc.). Questions arise

about the impact of radical socio-political changes on individuals and communities, and about the definition of different generations. In this respect, we would like to synchronize the problem of the active aging of the elderly with the processes taking place in the community and the possibilities for the formation of new social constructs.

Older people, community and volunteering before socialism

In her study of the community sphere, Maya Grekova gives precise definitions of the traditional community that characterised Bulgarian society before socialism. It is based on kinship, neighbourhood and friendship, "a sense of wholeness", naturalness (Grekova 2017, 41). The religious worldview occupies a central place as a general framework that defines the attitude to the world in the context of religious values and norms. With regard to the elderly, Mihova notes that they remain at work until old age, and this is one of the factors for the restoration of Bulgarian statehood and the achievement of an upswing in the country's economic development (Mihova 2019). In these conditions, social care emerged as a local initiative of the urban community and later in the activities of Christian, women's associations, etc. (Popova 2019, 35). The research is supported by the factual information provided by Popova about the existence of 52 homes for the elderly, of which 19 were run by Orthodox Christian fraternities of local temples, 18 by women's charitable societies, 9 were district homes of the Union "Public Support", 3 were municipal and 3 were diocesan. About 6000 people volunteer to care for the elderly, of whom 5000 are women. (Popova 2019, 40).

Public care for the elderly under socialism.

The situation changed radically after the two world wars. Grekova describes the reforms emanating from Europe, in line with Max Weber's understanding of the move away from the ideal type of community and closer to the type of "material rationality" in which different human micro-worlds meet for social interaction. The author pays particular attention to Karl Marx's views on the "future", but explicitly comments that they are invalid for the "lifeworld of socialist society" (Grekova 2017). Voskresensky describes the policies of the repressive system in various spheres of social life, affecting the socialisation of individuals, employment, education, intergenerational relations, marriage and family relations, and forms of everyday communication, and speaks of two generations for this period (Voskresensky 2021, 193).

The first socialist generation was characterised by positive natural population growth. Old age and even death do not arouse fear or anxiety, based on the values and attitudes of traditional society. There are enough young people on the labour market to fill jobs, so early retirement is seen as a particularly important social benefit and, above all, as a time of well-earned rest and relaxation. Those who have reached the required length of service and age are not given the right to work. (Mihova 2019).

With the rise to power of the Communists (1944) in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the process of nationalising the established institutions for the care of the elderly began. A number of them were closed, relocated, restructured and decisions were made by the central government without the participation of local communities. "The organisation of public care was transformed in such a way that the social chain that supported the dialogue that had been formed about the need for public sensitivity to the poor, the lonely and the homeless disappeared in them" (Popova 2019, 45). Voluntarism has been replaced by coercion directed by the state.

It is characteristic of the second generation after the 1950s that the population began to age, which became an economic and ethical problem. For the state, the elderly are a burden and an obstacle to 'revolutionary' progress. Processes of secularisation and individualisation are increasingly successful, creating a "specific elitist outsider" (Goncharova, Karamelska, 2019, 249). The outside world becomes a place of danger, bringing fear and tension. The understanding of death and ageing becomes an individual understanding. The family is torn apart by kinship ties, and the community is compromised and shows the first signs of disintegration.

State ideology carries out real actions to create the perception that the body continues to function and death can be postponed (Galabova 2019, 62). In Bulgaria, the Centre for Gerontology and Geriatrics is being established to organise events to activate the elderly. Groups for general physical training are being formed, gymnastics camps are being organised, and even micro-communities of athletes are being created. Physical activity is also associated with 'the broader field of retirement work, such as looking after grandchildren or working in the garden' (Galabova 2019, 73). The state is gradually transferring its commitment to the elderly to the family, despite the public stigmatisation of the traditional family model.

Stoynev observes: "The elderly fall into a situation of isolation, silent fear and hopelessness about the days to come. Having given up work and interest in the structure of society and its development, the old man limits the world to his own existence, where interests are extremely

limited. This leads him to unjustified hostility. The lack of work activity chains the person to his apartment, his room and finally to his bed" (Stoynev 2019, 20).

Public care for the elderly is changing. Popova states that in 1952 institutions for the elderly were definitively nationalised and divided into: homes for the mentally handicapped, homes for the severely physically handicapped, homes for the physically and mentally healthy, and homes for invalids from the wars and the struggle against fascism. This division was maintained in the post-socialist period. (Popova 2019, 58)

Post-socialism

After a few decades, in post-socialism, Bulgarian society finds itself in a situation of intensified population aging processes, accompanied by depopulation and depopulation as a result of low natural growth and unceasing migration activity (Mihova 2021, 62). The national policy in this context is carried out on the basis of a national concept, consistent with the priority goals of the European Union. In the Implementation Plan of the National Strategy for the Active Life of the Elderly in Bulgaria (2019-2030), four priorities for active aging in Bulgaria are specified, in accordance with the European Index for the Active Life of the Elderly.

Within the strategy, there are also sub-priorities and the responsible administrative structures are indicated. At the same time, there is a strong dominance of state organizations at the expense of the participation of NGOs or voluntary organizations. In the national strategy, there are no such structures in the sub-priority "Promoting volunteerism", the only organization represented is the Black People's Committee. There is a complete lack of both governmental and non-governmental organizations to ensure the supply of goods and services related to the needs of the elderly and to improve the attitude towards them for effective and positive anti-discrimination communication in the social sphere.

Another aspect of the issue is relevant, related to the way a generation thinks about itself, as Matilda Reilly writes: "the meanings we attach to age have power, they become age stereotypes that shape personal plans, hopes and fears" (Riley 1978).

Method

The presented theoretical part of the article raises the question of the influence of social changes on the elderly who lived under the conditions of a totalitarian regime and their active aging in the modern post-socialist world. Our hypothesis is related to the assumption that local voluntary initiatives can help the formation of new social constructs uniting elderly people in the roles of consumers and volunteers and activate them for social life. The purpose of the research is to investigate a local voluntary initiative "kitchen for the poor", to describe its social construction and its influence on the active aging of the elderly people involved in it - users and volunteers.

Volunteer kitchen for the poor on the territory of Blagoevgrad, located next to the Orthodox Church "St. Nicholas". The kitchen is a volunteer initiative established in 2016 and currently provides food to 220 people. The initiative involves a core of 30 volunteers, divided into 6 teams of five people each, and temporary members of the team - 65 people who periodically join.

The research data are in two lines of analysis:

1. Collecting data about the volunteers and users of the kitchen, their relationships, communication, connections, language, rules that characterize each social construct. The study was conducted using survey methods among 39 volunteers and 60 users of the kitchen. The survey is non-standardized, author's, composed of 10 questions, 7 of which have open answers.
2. Research based on the Active Aging Index of elderly people (volunteers and users) in search of the role of the new social construct on their lives. 30 non-standardized interviews were conducted between July and September 2023.

Results

1. Survey of elderly people within a local voluntary work initiative (voluntary kitchen for the poor).

Survey of volunteers

As part of the first task, a survey of users and adult volunteers was carried out. A core of 39 volunteers took part in the survey, out of a total of 65 regular and temporary staff working in

the kitchen. The questionnaire was composed of 10 questions, 7 of which were open-ended, allowing the analysis of the activity of the adult volunteers.

The first question provides information on age: 43.6% of the participants are over 55 years old, 30.8% are between 45 and 55 years old, 15.4% are between 35 and 40 years old and the rest are under 35 years old. In terms of gender, 69.2% of respondents were female and 30.8% male. The question: what is your profession, we see different answers retired (6%), salesman 5.1%, economist, cook, professional, mechanic, businessman, administrator, other). **The results show that the majority of seniors over 55 are still actively working.**

Regarding the frequency of their participation 30.8% participate every week for more than five years, 25.6% for one year, 23.1% for three years, 20.5% for less than five years. **The data suggests that the interest of the participants is sustained.**

To the question "Who introduced you to the initiative?" 48.7% answered - other volunteers, 33.3% friends and acquaintances, 17.9% among the founders I am and 12.8% media - radio, TV, social networks. **This shows that the initiative is mainly promoted among volunteers and initiated by other participants in the local community.**

An interesting multiple choice question is How do you understand volunteering? The results are summarized in Fig. 1. In order to define this type of locally formed micro-community, the survey looked at the possibility of volunteers and users forming a new local community.

Relevant here is the question: to what extent do they know each other and would they help each other personally? - Fig. 2. It makes an impression that every fifth volunteer communicates outside the volunteer initiative with users, feels them like friends, helps each other, has their personal coordinates. The data shows the creation of lasting bonds between adults

The next question aims to find out how much the volunteers know about the users' problems - Fig. 3. The results show that the volunteers are very well acquainted with the personal problems of the users, which testifies to the good communication between them. A large percentage of 40% consider that adults who take food from the kitchen are socially isolated, and another 33.3% that they have problems with their family, which is an indicator of the presence of sharing and knowledge of personal destinies.

In summary, in response to the direct question of what role the volunteer kitchen for the poor initiative plays for the local community, the highest proportion (48.7%) believes that the local community opens up to the problem of the needy elderly and becomes sympathetic. Almost as

many (43.6%) think that the community is actually activated by actions to address the problems of the elderly, 33.3% think that the community supports the idea but is distant and uncertain about its effectiveness, 2.6% are indicators of the power of personal example and no respondent believes that the kitchen has no impact on the local community. This question testifies to the personal conviction of the volunteers in what they do and the benefit of the activity to improve the lives of the elderly and change attitudes and attitudes towards them.

Survey of kitchen users.

The users of the kitchen are mostly elderly people from vulnerable groups: families of drug addicts, poor, lonely, socially disadvantaged, disabled. 60 people over 55 years of age who use the services of the volunteer kitchen on a weekly basis were interviewed.

The author's questionnaire contained 15 questions structured to obtain information in the following areas: demographics of the respondents; reasons for visiting the soup kitchen for the poor; attitudes towards the volunteers who prepare the meals; clarity about unmet basic personal needs of the respondents and expectations that the kitchen would meet them; and interest in the Sunday school located at the soup kitchen.

Users of the community kitchen were predominantly in the 70-90 age group, followed by people in their 50s and 60s. The gender distribution favoured women, who made up 68% of the respondents. 80% of respondents were without a partner due to divorce or death of a spouse or partner. Almost half of the respondents continue to look after their own adult children. This is indicative of a phenomenon characterised by adult children's fears of separation from their parents for various reasons (inability to achieve personal financial independence, illness, feelings of guilt for leaving the 'family nest', long-term unemployment, etc.).

The circumstances in which the poor people interviewed are regular users of the soup kitchen are

- Financial difficulties (low pensions, long-term unemployment);
- the possibility of obtaining hot, cooked and varied food;
- social contacts outside their traditional daily environment (meetings with volunteers, conversations with food preparers, etc.);
- partial emotional relief (socialising with other kitchen users, allowing them to identify with other people in difficulty);

Almost 90% of respondents knew the food preparers by name. They are willing to make personal contact with them when they need help to solve their existential problems. These data are supported by the clear position of all respondents that they count the kitchen volunteers among their friends, whom they would also turn to for support.

One part of the survey asked about the desire of the poor for additional services that the soup kitchen could offer. The most popular were a pilgrimage centre, a medical clinic and dental care. Last on the list was the need for a job placement centre and an overnight crisis centre.

An Orthodox Sunday School for people of all ages is also located on the kitchen premises. 63% of the respondents are interested in its lectures and activities.

2. Active ageing of kitchen users research.

In order to determine the general characteristics of active ageing of older adults with vital activity during socialism, an additional survey was conducted among 60 persons over 55 years of age who participated in the social construct Voluntary Kitchen. A 14-question survey based on the Active Aging Index collected information on health status, financial situation, social activity, participation in cultural life, and activities related to volunteer work for the family or community.

The age group was as follows 33% were aged 55-69, 30% were aged 70-76 and 10% were aged 80-90. In the course of the field study, two age groups were established with representatives in the range of 24-34 years (10%) and 44-50 years (17%).

The data obtained show that 100% of the older people interviewed in the first three groups (representing 73% of the total respondents) are apolitical. Of these, 9% help needy elderly relatives, relatives, neighbours and people in the community. The self-assessment of their state of health shows that it is generally satisfactory. A third of the three groups mentioned above claim to have no material difficulties, and the remaining two thirds have financial difficulties which they try to compensate for with the help of relatives and the support of the social services in their place of residence. A similar number live with their adult children in their own homes. Over 80% of the sample do not own or use mobile phones, and those who do use old models.

Social interactions take place at several levels - family, neighbours, Volunteer Kitchen. Respondents highlighted their participation in the kitchen, access to cooked food and interaction with volunteer staff as important to them, including the opportunity to meet with other adults on a weekly basis. They report that the existential stage they are in is

characterised by a lack of traditional socio-cultural stimulation for other age groups, such as concerts, theatre, cinema and outings.

Awareness of the problem of community breakdown and its relationship to poverty is key to our study. By studying volunteer kitchens for the poor, we can argue that their role is not only to satisfy some of the basic needs of the needy person, but also has a huge social role in the life of each user, realising support and encouragement, the person to cope with life problems, gain meaning to his existence.

CONCLUSION

In the context of a growing ageing population, not only in Bulgaria but also in the European Union as a whole, it is of utmost importance to look for new opportunities for active ageing of older people. In the former socialist countries, this process is further complicated by the specific characteristics of the elderly population, whose education and socialisation at a young age was shaped by totalitarian ideology.

The main causes include the destruction of social communities and the natural processes that take place within them, one of which is volunteering. Drastic changes in socio-economic conditions have also created a clear divide between rich and poor, with the former often at risk of social exclusion.

In order to be activated, new social constructs are needed to motivate older people to rediscover the role of the community in sharing and support and to believe in it and in themselves.

The fieldwork carried out draws attention to several highlights related to the characteristics of older people:

1. In terms of health and financial well-being, users of the local volunteering initiative consider their health and financial well-being to be satisfactory, but this is not confirmed by volunteers.
2. Health is the real reason for their inability to work, which is confirmed by the sample of volunteers.
3. The perception of financial stability is rather deceptive, because the users use additional social services from the state or rely on the support of relatives. They live alone in inherited housing or care for their financially unstable children.

4. Their social integration is very limited and restricted to rather infrequent meetings with neighbours, children and grandchildren, there is a lost connection with relatives and friends.

5. There is a lack of participation in sporting, cultural and political activities.

The study confirms the low Active Ageing Index among older people in Bulgaria, especially those who do not have additional financial resources. At the same time, participants in the study insist that local initiatives such as the Voluntary Kitchen for the Poor contribute to changing their social activity and their sense of sharing and security.

We also draw attention to the possibilities of volunteering and its natural power to create micro-communities that can activate socially inactive older people for change. We would like to focus public policy attention on the promotion of volunteering, not only by large organisations, but also by important local community volunteering initiatives.