

# GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIAL WORK: A FAMILY SYSTEMS APPROACH

*Alexandru NEAGOE\**

## **Abstract**

The present article sets out to present a systemic perspective on the role which families play in the social care of elderly population. The article is based on relevant research in the field of social work and systemic practice. An opening section of the study highlights the ongoing significance of families in gerontological social work. Next, according to a family systems perspective, the whole family system is described both as a target for the social worker's intervention (given the possibility that certain difficulties which the elderly encounter may be related to family dysfunctionalities) and also as a valuable resource in the effort of increasing the quality of life for the elderly. Thirdly, the article seeks to identify and analyse a number of issues which are particularly relevant in the social work with elderly people and their families. Finally, a concluding section brings together some of the main findings of the article.

**Keywords:** family, social work, gerontology, change, systemic approach.

## **Résumé**

Notre article a pour but de détailler, selon la perspective systémique, le rôle des familles dans le processus d'assistance sociale des personnes âgées. Cette étude a comme point de départ des ouvrages essentiels publiés dans le domaine du travail social et de la pratique systémique. La première partie de cet article souligne le rôle de plus en plus prégnant de la famille dans le travail social gérontologique. La deuxième partie décrit et applique le point de vue systémique sur la famille en tant que cible de l'intervention justifiée de l'assistant social (parfois les dis-fonctionnalités familiales sont le point de départ pour certaines difficultés que les personnes âgées doivent surpasser) et en tant que ressource toujours renouvelable pour l'amélioration de la qualité de la vie des personnes âgées. La troisième section de notre démarche vise l'identification et l'analyse de quelques problèmes, considérés parmi les plus importants dans l'assistance sociale des personnes âgées et de leurs familles. Les conclusions finales de cette étude réunissent les points essentiels ainsi que les idées-clés de notre travail appliqué.

**Mots-clés :** famille, travail social, gérontologie, changement, approche systémique.

## **Rezumat**

Articolul de față își propune să articuleze o perspectivă sistemică asupra rolului pe care familiile îl joacă în asistența socială a populației vârstnice. Lucrarea se bazează pe cercetări relevante din domeniul asistenței sociale și practicii sistemice. O primă secțiune a lucrării subliniază rolul pe care familiile continuă să îl joace în asistența socială gerontologică. În al doilea rând, conform abordării familiale sistemice, întreaga familie este descrisă ca o țintă a

---

\* Professor, Department of Social Work, West University of Timișoara, Bvd. Pârvan Nr. 4, Timișoara, Romania; e-mail: alexandru.neagoe@e-uvt.ro.

intervenției asistentului social (dată fiind posibilitatea ca unele dintre dificultățile cu care vârstnicii se confruntă să aibă legătură cu disfuncționalități familiale) dar și ca o resursă valoroasă pentru îmbunătățirea calității vieții vârstnicului. Cea de-a treia secțiune își propune să identifice și să analizeze câteva probleme cu relevanță deosebită în asistența socială a persoanelor vârstnice și a familiilor acestora. În final, o secțiune de concluzii aduce laolaltă unele dintre principalele contribuții ale studiului.

**Cuvinte cheie:** familie, asistență socială, gerontologie, schimbare, abordare sistemică.

“Life’s great achievements are not obtained through physical strength, through bodily activity or performance, but through debate, character, expression of opinion. Of such things late age not only that it is not deprived, but, regularly, it has them in a higher degree... The elderly keep their intellect sufficiently well if they keep their minds active and fully engaged. The grace which crowns late age is influence.”

*Cicero*

## **1. Introduction**

Following major international trends in the field, specialised research and publications in the area of gerontological social work have registered important progress in Romania over the last couple of decades (Bódi 2017; Bucur 2007; Gal 2003; Gîrleanu-Șoitu 2006; Mândrilă 2009; Mureșan 2012; Runcan 2013; Stanciu 2008 etc.). As indicated by many of these studies, the factors which are impending on the life quality of the elderly are many and diverse. Charles Zastrow and Karen K. Kirst-Ashman conveniently divide these factors into three major categories: biological, psychological and social (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman 2010). In the present article we will focus exclusively on those aspects of the gerontological social work which relate to the family of the elderly. Thus, the first section argues that, despite widespread claims to the contrary, families continue to be highly relevant in the wellbeing of the elderly. The second section will review some of the most common views of social work professionals regarding the specific role which families tend to play (or should play) in the life of their aging members. Finally, the third and most important section of the article focuses on a number of specific issues which are to be kept in mind when working with the elderly and their families.

## **2. The relevance of the family for the wellbeing of the elderly**

One of the most widespread myths regarding the elderly, especially among urban and Western societies, is that families are widely abandoning their

aging members, that filial responsibilities are beginning to be forgotten and that the elderly are condemned to live in isolation and solitude. In other words, the notion of extended family (or even the notion of family as such) is an endangered species and the blame for this situation is to be attributed to economic development, industrialisation, urbanisation, globalisation, etc. (Hartman and Laird 1983, 354-355; Macaulay 2016).

Despite the widespread acceptance of such ideas (especially in popular circles), the research which has been carried out over the last three or four decades in social sciences seems to contradict them fairly clearly. Various studies which have been conducted in Western and urban societies have indicated that the majority of the elderly have strong ties with their relatives. Many families are making great efforts in order to “juggle” work, family responsibilities in their immediate families, and care-giving for aging parents (Bookman and Kimbrel 2011; Merrill 1997). Moreover, the research has widely contradicted the assumption that families where more than two generations are living together are necessarily problematic. On the contrary, over half of the younger family members have stated that the integration of an aging person in their home has caused no major inconvenience for the life of the family and even of those who have indicated that the integration of an elderly person in their nuclear family has represented a challenge, the majority have stated that eventually they were able to find satisfactory solutions for living together (Newman 1975; Snelling 2016).

Another important finding which has emerged from the research is that the great majority of personal services which the elderly need are being covered by other family members, who in many cases become the “parents of their own parents” (Fetterman 2008).

The evident significance of these observations is that families continue to play an important role in the lives of most of the elderly and that in the majority of cases the elderly are themselves part of their family life.

Undoubtedly, this statement is all the more valid in the case of the considerably less urbanised population of Romania, where, traditionally, inter-generational relationships are usually stronger than in the more westernised societies, while the sharing of one roof by three or even four generations is much more common.

It needs to be stated, therefore, that any strategy of increasing the quality of life of the elderly must pay particular attention to their families. In other words, a systemic approach of the social situation of the elderly must take as its starting point their family system and the social work intervention must be directed as much as possible towards the family system.

### **3. Competing views of social work professionals regarding the role of families in the lives of the elderly**

In a foundational study focusing on the relationship between family and state institutions in social work with people with special needs, including aging clients who belong to this category, Robert Moroney has identified four major descriptions offered by professionals regarding the role of the family in the social care of this category of people (Moroney 1980).

According to the first point of view, the family represents *part of the problem*, constituting often an obstacle for the services which state institutions seek to offer to their clients. Thus, for instance, it is believed that the visits which family members pay to institutionalised elderly end up disturbing them. Indirectly and subtly, such professionals communicate to families that since they are, for various reasons, unable to look after their elderly member, it might be better for them to diminish or even to quit their ties and let the professionals make the decisions and offer the necessary care.

A second view portrays the family *strictly as a resource*. Professionals in this category stay in charge of the decisions which are to be made but invite the support of the families whenever it is needed. This approach creates its own set of problems. Because it is expected that the family should offer support without being involved in the decision making, the family members may end up feeling manipulated and exploited. Moreover, since the family members are faced with certain requests without an adequate prior evaluation of their family situation and/or without receiving, if need be, certain forms of support, such family members are running the risk of becoming over-burdened or may blame themselves for illegitimate reasons.

In a third case, the family is regarded as *part of the team*. The family is invited to take part in the decision making processes and thus becomes a partner in the process of caring for the elderly member. The success of this approach, according to Moroney, depends on the specific way in which this partnership is being operated and on the measure in which the family contribution is a systematic or an incidental one (like in the second case).

A fourth model, and the only one which Moroney finds to be feasible, is the one according to which the professional understands that *the object of the intervention is not just the elderly person but the whole family system*.

In addition to the balanced critical evaluation of the various understandings of the various professional paradigms described above, Moroney's

study has the merit of emphasising that *the family cannot be regarded as irrelevant* in the helping equation, while the specific way in which the professional views the role of the family is crucial for the quality of life of the elderly. More precisely, *gerontological social workers must not view the family of the elderly person simply as a resource, without regarding it at the same time as a specific target for their intervention*. Such an understanding of the gerontological social work is an essential part of a systemic understanding of family social work (Neagoie 2007).

Such an understanding of the elders' family as a resource and target for change must, however, be balanced by a complementary perspective, which regards the elders themselves as a valuable resource for the family and for the society (Bódi, 2017). This perspective is part and parcel of the international preoccupation with active aging and it has a particularly important application in the context of Romania, given its current demographic evolution and the growing percentage of elderly population (CNPV 2015; Ghețău 2007, 2011; Mureșan et al. 2009).

#### **4. Specific issues in working with aging clients and their families: a systemic approach**

##### **4.1. *Defining the Problem***

The way in which family members formulate the presenting problem regarding the elderly person is often similar to the situation in which parents come to ask for the social worker's support in relation to a child or a teenager. In both cases the presenting problem may not necessarily be the most important one for the social work process (Janzen and Harris 1997, 126-127). This should not mean that the social worker can afford to ignore the problem which is presented by the family. To be sure, whatever the family describes as being the problem it is something which is important for them and, consequently, the social worker must make sure that that problem is dealt with in a way which is acceptable to the family. However, the point is that when the presenting problem has to do with an elderly person, the social worker must consider the possibility that other aspects of the problem may exist and these may be more important for the family functioning than the presenting problem. Thus, for instance, the problems which are associated with the elderly person may be rooted in the fears, anxieties, or self-guilt of other family members, related to the level at which they may feel unable to deal with the elderly's role change.

## **4.2. *The Relation of the Elderly With Their Descendants: The Role of the Genogram***

One important aspect which the social worker needs to bear in mind when working with an elderly person and his or her family is the quality of the relationship between the elderly and their adult children or other adult descendants in the family (Janzen and Harris 1997, 127-130). For this purpose, the social worker will seek to acquire a minimum of information regarding the elderly and their children during various stages of their family life. The probability is that if the son or daughter enjoyed a constructive relationship with the parents during childhood and youth, the relationship is sufficiently strong in the present to allow for a satisfactory solution to the existing problems. Otherwise, if the relationship has been conflictual or inadequate in the past, the current problems may be considerably harder to solve.

If the history of the relationship between the elderly and their children has been characterised by conflict and unsolved issues, the social worker will seek to make sure that the current meetings with family members will not degenerate into situations where some family members will try to take revenge against others or in which family members will simply end up blaming themselves. The goal will be, instead, to reach a degree of mutual openness to allow for adequate planning and decision making. More specifically, in the case of unsolved conflicts, special efforts should be made in order to avoid moving the elderly parents with their children, at least until a certain progress in the development of the relationship can be noted.

The family genogram may be a particularly helpful instrument through which the quality of the intergenerational relationships of the family may be analysed and necessary interventions may be identified (Gal 2003; Hartman and Laird 1983, 360-363). Most times, the elderly will be able to find themselves close to the centre of this family map, with two or three generations above and two or three other generations below. Their role in the continuity of the family is thus graphically expressed.

The process of drawing the genogram, with the active contribution of the elderly, will give them the chance to rehearse major events and themes in their intergenerational family history. With the help of the social worker, the elderly person may come to see certain individuals, events or conflicts in a new light, or may even be able “to close some chapters” which had unnecessarily stayed open for a long time. Moreover, the information which the social worker has been able to acquire regarding the parents or the grandparents of the elderly, regarding the way they had lived or died, may

throw new light on the expectations or fears which are influencing the lives of the elderly in the present.

Another important value of the genogram in such a context is that it may provide the means through which aging clients may be able to hand over a valuable piece of family “inheritance” (in the form of graphic history) to subsequent generations (Neagoe 2007, 81). Much of this wealth of information may be otherwise doomed to be lost. Last but not least, members of the younger generation who have been involved in the drawing of the genogram alongside the aging family member have discovered most times that such an experience had enriched them in a very unique way.

### ***4.3. The Family and Its “Ecological” System: the Role of the Ecomap***

The aging process inevitably leads to the increased isolation of the elderly in relation to their ecological system, depriving them gradually of its valuable resources (Bătrân 2010, 45-46). The increasing number of deaths among close relations, the gradual decrease in mobility, the growing number of health issues all tend to feed feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and uselessness. Although in many cases the social structures comprise sufficient resources for improving the life quality of the elderly, the level of bureaucracy which is inevitably present in such structures can easily lead to the impossibility of the elderly to access those resources. The “border” between the elderly and their ecological environment is dysfunctional. It is precisely here, however, that the family of the elderly can play an essential role by facilitating the communication and transfer of resources between the elderly and their ecological system (Sussman 1977, 2-20).

The ecomap can be, in such cases, a particularly useful instrument in the social worker’s intervention (Gal 2003; Neagoe 2007, 90-98). Through the use of the ecomap the social worker will be more easily able to identify, with the help of the family (including the elderly, as much as possible) not only the functional transactions between the elderly and their environment but also the latent but unexploited resources, on which the subsequent intervention should focus. During the intervention, the social worker will make sure that the roles which the various family members have agreed to play will be clearly specified in a contract or intervention plan.

## **5. Conclusion: Key Findings and Further Research**

Far from becoming irrelevant to the welfare of the elderly, families continue to represent a major player in the helping network. According to a family systems approach, families are regarded both as target and as a major

resource for change in the lives of the elderly (while the elders themselves should also be seen a valuable resource for the family and society). Starting from this observation and based on the findings of relevant research, the present article has identified and described a number of issues which are particularly relevant in the social work with elderly population and their families. Thus, it has been noted that the presenting problem should not automatically be regarded as the single or primary problem of the elders and their families – very often the presenting problem being a mere symptom of larger problems in the family system. Secondly, an adequate system of evaluation and intervention is necessary in regard to the relationships between the elderly and their adult descendants. The family genogram may be a particularly helpful instrument in this respect. Thirdly, the relationship between the elderly and their ecological environment should be evaluated (with the help of the ecomap), as a means of identifying and accessing important resources for the elders' welfare.

These findings are particularly significant at a time when Europe in general and Romania in particular are seeing numerous changes in the area of family life. How are these changes likely to impend on the life quality of the elderly population? In what way should gerontological social work be adapted in order to adequately respond to such a changing environment? These are but a few of the questions which further research in social work is expected to address.

### **Acknowledgment**

The present article represents a revised and updated version of a similar study which has been published as: Neagoe, A. (2009). The Family, As a Target and Resource for Change in Gerontological Social Work. *The Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 2, 91-99.

### **References**

1. Bătrân, D. (2010). Îmbătrânirea, un proces ireversibil. *Revista de Administrație Publică și Politici Sociale*, 1(3), 40-57.
2. Bódi, D.C. (2017). *Persoanele vârstnice, resursă importantă în familie și societate*, Editura Institutul European, Iași.
3. Bookman, A. and Kimbrel, D. (2011). Families and elder care in the twenty-first century. *The Future of Children*, 21(2), 117-40.
4. Bucur, V.M. (2007), Asistența socială în fața vârstei a treia. In: Muntean, A. and Sagebiel, J. (coord.), *Practici în asistența socială: România și Germania*, Editura Polirom, Iași.
5. CNPV – Consiliul Național al Persoanelor Vârstnice (2015), *Situația persoanelor vârstnice din România*, available at: [http://www.cnpv.ro/pdf/analize2015/Situația\\_persoanelor\\_varstnice\\_din\\_Romania\\_MP.pdf](http://www.cnpv.ro/pdf/analize2015/Situația_persoanelor_varstnice_din_Romania_MP.pdf)



6. Fetterman, M. (2008). Becoming “parent of your parent”: an emotionally wrenching process, *USA Today*, Feb. 2.
7. Gal, D. (2003). *Asistența socială a persoanelor vârstnice*, Editura Todesco, Cluj-Napoca.
8. Ghețău, V. (2007). *Declinul demografic și viitorul populației României, O perspectivă din anul 2007 asupra populației României în secolul 21*, Editura Alpha MDN, Buzău.
9. Ghețău, V. (2011). Câți pensionari ar putea avea România până în 2030? *Revista de Asistență Socială*, X(3), 115-136.
10. Gîrleanu-Șoitu, D. (2006). *Vârsta a treia*, Editura Institutul European, Iași.
11. Hartman, A. and Laird, J. (1983). *Family Centered Social Work Practice*. The Free Press, New York.
12. Janzen, C. and Harris, O. (1997). *Family Treatment in Social Work Practice*. Third Edition, F.E. Peacock Publishers, Itasca, Illinois.
13. Macaulay, S. (2016). 12 Reasons elders are “abandoned” in long-term care. Available at: <http://myalzheimersstory.com/2016/10/07/12-reasons-elders-are-abandoned-in-long-term-care/>.
14. Mândrilă, C.G. (2009). *Procesul de îmbătănire din perspectiva asistenței sociale*, Editura ”Al. I. Cuza”, Iași.
15. Merrill, D.M. (1997). *Caring for Elderly Parents: Juggling Work, Family, and Caregiving in Middle and Working Class Families*. Auburn House, Westport, Connecticut.
16. Moroney, R. (1980). *Families, Social Services, and Social Policy: The Issue of Shared Responsibility*. National Institute of Mental Health, Rockville, Maryland.
17. Mureșan, C. Rotariu, T, Rebeleanu, A., Hărăguș, M., Hărăguș, T. (2009). *Situația vârstnicilor în România*, Fundația Principesa Margareta, București.
18. Mureșan, M.R. (2012). *Vârsta a treia, între autonomie și vulnerabilitate* (teză de doctorat), Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai, Cluj Napoca.
19. Neagoe, A. (2007). *Asistența socială a familiei: o abordare sistemică*. Editura Universității de Vest, Timișoara.
20. Newman, S. (1975). *Housing Adjustments of Older People: A Report of Findings from the Second Phase*. Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan.
21. Runcan, P.L. (2013). *Depression in the Elderly*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne.
22. Snelling, S. (2016). Multigenerational Living Is Back And That's A Good Thing. *Next Avenue*, Oct. 9.
23. Stanciu, C. (2008). *Noțiuni introductive în asistența socială gerontologică*, Editura Solness, Timișoara.
24. Sussman, M.B. (1977). Family, Bureaucracy, and the Elderly Individual: An Organizational Linkage Perspective. In: Shanas E. and Sussman M.B. (Eds.). *Family, Bureaucracy, and the Elderly*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2-20.
25. Zastrow, C. and Kirst-Ashman, K.K. (2010). *Understanding Human Behaviour and the Social Environment*, Eighth Edition, Brooks/Cole, Belmont, California.