

Chapter 29

Examining the Variables Affecting the Social Networks of the Elderly

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to examine the variables affecting the social networks of the elderly. A simple random sampling method was used as a data collection method in the research. The data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The participants of the study are 500 individuals aged 60 and over from members of the Ankara branch of the Turkish Pensioners Association. According to the results of the study, there is a considerable negative correlation between social network and depression ($r=-0.40$, $p < 0.001$) and loneliness ($r=-0.49$, $p < 0.001$). Also, social loneliness and depression is the stronger negative predictor of the social network. Moreover, there is a considerable positive correlation between social network and perceived available support ($r=-0.52$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, there is a moderate positive correlation between social network and successful aging behavior ($r=-0.30$, $p < 0.001$) and life satisfaction ($r=-0.35$, $p < 0.001$).

INTRODUCTION

Today, developments in medicine, health and technology have increased human life relatively. According to TUIK data, it was determined that the elderly population consisting of 9.1% of Turkey's population in 2019. It is estimated that this ratio will increase to 10.2% in 2023. According to the 2019 World Population Prospects, 1 in 6 people in the world will be over 65 by 2050 ; this ratio is 1 in 11 in 2019 (United Nations, 2019).

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When the aging statistics observed both in our country and in the world are examined; the aging of the world with the increase of the elderly population over the years and the future increase expectations regarding the elderly population show the importance of the aging issue and the need to investigate in a multifaceted way.

Aging is an inevitable growth and development process that has chronological, biological, physiological, social and psychological dimensions, starting from birth and continuing until death. It is defined as all of the structural and functional changes of the organism at the level of molecules, cells, tissues, organs and systems that occur with the progression of time, which are not reversible (Saygılı, 2011).

Old age brings along the progress of physical weakness. With old age, it is seen that the problems become increasingly complex when socioeconomic power decreases, less income and increasing expenditures, new health needs as well as food preparation, house cleaning, transportation and other activities of daily life (Sluzki, 2000). While this situation makes it difficult for elderly individuals to continue their daily life activities, at the same time to access and maintain social networks necessary to maintain active relationships, it leads to an increasing need for help (Adams & Blieszner, 1995).

People are social beings. Most of us live with families, work in communities, and are defined as members of a culture and nation. The social network appears as a network of social interactions and relationships. More specifically, the social network consists of a group of people with whom there is regular contact at the personal level, and the individual's family, relatives, friends and neighbors, etc. constitutes a social network of relationships. Different definitions of social networks have been developed within the framework of different theories to describe the social relationships, characteristics and perception of the individual that surround a person (Victor, et al., 2000).

Social networks are the constellations of interpersonal ties that individuals variously maintain (Litwin & Shaul, 2018). Social networks consist of family members, relatives, friends, private friends, teachers, colleagues, neighbors, ideological religious and ethnic groups, and the society in which the individual lives (Ardahan, 2006). While it is accepted that the wider social networks will increase the social support, the large social support network may have a negative effect as it will increase the responsibility to others (Cohen, 2004).

The individual social network depends on the individual's characteristics and those with whom they interact, and the individual's perception of the support provided for them by network members (Amieva, Stoykova, Matharan, Helmer, Antonucci & Dartigues, 2010). In terms of structure, a person's social network can be formed by the people they interact with regularly, the characteristics of these individuals, the norms and values of the network, and the quality of the interactions (Schwarzbach et al., 2014).

As people age and suffer many losses, their social networks also shrink. This reduces the amount of social resources available to deal with stress in old age (Thoits, 2012). Studies show that social networks affect the health and well-being of older people. Insufficient or absent social networks can lead to social isolation by creating health risks (Cornwell Waite, 2009). Lack of social networks has been shown to be associated with a range of adverse health outcomes for old age, including loneliness, depression, lack of self-esteem, higher risk of disability, poor recovery from illness, and premature death (Lubben et al., 2006; Tomaka et al., 2006).

It is stated that social network features have the power to explain the social behaviors of the people concerned. The importance of social networks and their features is related to the extent to which members meet their needs. The functions of the social network can be summarized as "the set of personal contacts in which the individual maintains his social identity and receives emotional support, financial assistance, services, information and new social contacts" (Walker, Macbnde, & Vachon, 1977)

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