

STUDY OF THE SENIOR POPULATION OF COPȘA MICĂ AFTER THE REVOLUTION AND THE MODEL CHANGE. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC VISION.

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Abstract

Objectives. The health-care and welfare needs of the elderly population are increasing in Eastern European countries, especially in Romania. In 1989, subsequently after the fall of Ceausescu's regime, the country had to restart, with the novelty of going abroad to work in the post-revolutionary Romanian context, retaining those who would become the future old age of the country. The purpose of this article was to explore the various social problems faced by this sector of the population, as a result of an ethnography within the framework of a case study carried out in the city of Copșa Mică.

Material and methods. The study was based on an ethnographic research carried out between September 2020 and April 2021, supported by discourse analysis of 12 life stories and 18 in-depth interviews, a total of 30 people from the town of Copșa Mică, 15 men and 15 women, whose ages were between 53 and 85 years.

Results. In particular, this study revealed the existence of invisible illnesses and suffering that affect mental health, such as loneliness, abandonment or depression. These discomforts come, partly, as a result of the change of paradigm, and the constant migration of former workers sons and daughters.

Conclusions. It is necessary to rethink these contemporary challenges, in which the current social structure puts old age aside, with the duty of positioning it towards a dignified old age and increasing social strategies to face the growing need for care and attention.

Keywords: abandonment, loneliness, migration, mental health, old age.

Introduction

This article derives from one of the analytical consequences observed during by the fieldwork in Romania.

The health-care and welfare needs of the elderly population are increasing in Eastern European countries, especially in Romania. In 1989, with the fall of Ceausescu, the country had to restart, with the novelty of going abroad to work in the post-revolutionary Romanian context, retaining those who would become the future old age of the country, although most of the workers of Copșa Mică decided to stay in the same place until today, despite living in a toxic environment.

For Le Breton (cited in De Haro Honrubia, 2002) the old man slowly slips out of the symbolic field, he repeals the central values of modernity: youth, seduction, vitality, work. It is the embodiment of the repressed. A reminder of the precariousness and fragility of the human condition, it is the face of absolute otherness. An unrealistic image of aging is projected in our daily life, in a society that has the cult of youth and that no longer knows how to symbolize the

fact of aging or dying. Old age translates the moment in which the body is exposed to the gaze of the other in an unfavorable way (Le Bretón, 2002, as cited in De Haro Honrubia, 2014).

On the other hand, the World Health Organization [WHO] warns us of the concept of active aging (as cited in Gómez-Rubio, 2019, p.79). This conception assumes the elderly as potential resources that should be used, and therefore be useful to the economy, the community and families, taking a productivist outlook regarding old age. The WHO justifies it by stating: "The child of yesterday is the adult of today and will be the grandmother or the grandfather of tomorrow. The quality of life they will enjoy as grandparents will depend on the risks and opportunities they experience throughout their lives, as well as how successive generations provide mutual help and support when needed" (as cited in Gómez-Rubio, 2019, p. 79).

This idea of biopolitics aims at the emergence of a concrete ideal of population and the exclusion of difference. On the other hand, biopolitics makes those groups live that conform to the profile that the modern capitalist state projects for its functionality, such as productivity, while letting those who do not die (as cited in Gómez-Rubio, 2019)

In today's Romania, as Marinescu (2020) points out, the general image of Romanian's older adults is extremely fragmented and incomplete. The existing research in Romania on older people is mainly descriptive and carried out on a certain level, focusing on specific factors that affect their lives (poverty or illness) (Bodogai & Cutler, 2014, as cited in Marinescu, 2020). Regarding the quality of life of the elderly, existing data show that Romanians, aged 65 and over, generally live in poverty (73% say they do not have enough resources to survive from one month to the following), and the three main factors that influence their quality of life are: health, family relationships and economic situation (Garoschy & Mihart, 2010; National Council of the Elderly, 2014, as cited in Marinescu, 2020). In a cross-sectional study of 241 patients (124 men and 117 women) over the age of 60 years, it was found that in elderly patients of both genders, tumor pathology predominates (lung in men and breast and cervix in women) (Baciu, 2015).

After evaluating the image of the elderly population, studies emphasized the fact that limited access to medical facilities or medical treatment (21%), social and psychological factors, vulnerabilities (31%), social isolation and loneliness (31%), age discrimination (39%) and poor level of understanding of their own rights (65%), were the main elements associated with people older than 65 years in Romania (National Council of the Elderly, 2014, as cited in Marinescu, 2020).

On the other hand, a recent study showed that living as a single person, dissatisfaction with the retirement status and the problems encountered in obtaining the basic resources of daily life, were associated with a higher level of perceived loneliness among the elderly in Romania, Bulgaria and Russia (Faludi, 2015, as cited in Rada, 2018).

The fundamental question is why. From here the purpose of this article was to understand and explore the different narratives of the elderly population of the Coșșa Mică area within the social perceptions of the communist and post-communist period, beyond the historical environmental contamination, revealing other social problems that initially they were not contemplated. I concluded to investigate this place since it is here where my father was born, and where my grandparents lived and worked. Most of the younger population migrated looking for new opportunities once the industrial decline began with the closure of Carbosin (black smoke factory) in 1993 and the acquisition of Sometra (metallurgical factory) by foreign capitals (Milytheos S.A.), thus beginning the phase of the neoliberal system.

Also, the purpose of this article was to explore the various social problems faced by this sector of the population at risk.

Material and methods

The main research methods used in this article were the in-depth interview, life history, and participant observation. The study was based on an ethnographic research carried out between September 2020 and April 2021, composed by the analysis of discourses from a set of 12 life stories and 18 in-depth interviews, a total of 30 people from the town of Copșa Mică, 15 men and 15 women, ranging between 53-85 years old. The initial sampling of the population is carried out through the neighborhood community network, most of them acquaintances of my grandparents who agreed to be interviewed based on this bond of trust. From now on the sampling takes on the shape of a "snowball", the neighborhood network starts working as a connection to find new informants and participants, ensuring their diversity to provide broad and contrasted information.

The in-depth interview and life stories, as such, was a qualitative method that helps to address social phenomena and promotes the subjective deepening of the topic, so, taking into account the characteristics, a total of 3 blocks were collected with semi-structured questions divided into two stages, communist times and today.

Life stories (Taylor & Bogdan, 1994) are social products that belong to the realm of collective meaning. These are narratives that try to reflect those significant events of the individual's experience. The life stories seek to reach those aspects of social life that are part of the significant events of a community. These were essential in this research, since the search for these meanings facilitated the understanding of certain social facts and gave answers to the questions raised at the beginning. Taylor and Bogdan (1994) point out that this method differs from autobiographies because the researcher enquires for the person's story and worldview and pieces together the life story as a final part.

The 3 blocks of the in-depth interviews were divided with the following criteria: Block 1. Communist context, situational, How did you live in Copșa Mică during communism? What was life like? What values did you and your community have? / Block 2. Collapse and Revolution of 89. How did you experience the Revolution? What did you feel at that moment? How did you imagine the future? How did the closing of the factories affect you? / Block 3. Consequences of the change. Did the change have consequences in your life and in the population? What values have changed in society? How is life now? Do you suffer from loneliness?

Week after week, during the fieldwork and ethnographic research period, an attempt was made to capture, record and visualize everything that was happening in people's homes, in their coexistence, in their thoughts. In order to obtain information and references about their lives and how they are linked to the old age of now, it was necessary to delve and explore their lived experiences, emotions of their childhood, youth, desires, responsibilities regarding care, their values, ethics, their way of being and being in the world based on their different narratives of affliction.

These are some research questions that the author tried to analyze about the drastic change of the system that occurred in Romania and its consequences, where the inhabitants of the area had to adapt to a new paradigm and their way of being in the world.

Table 1*People involved in the study*

NAME	GENDER	AGE
Anica	Woman	55 years
Maria	Woman	82 years
Viorica	Woman	85 years
Lânuta	Woman	70 years
Filomena	Woman	73 years
Adela	Woman	56 years
Ilie	Man	70 years
Veronica	Woman	85 years
Petra	Woman	69 years
Ana	Woman	80 years

Results*Socio-political and migratory contextualization*

The second period, which followed the events of 1989, events that represented a turning point in the political and socio-economic life of Romania, was characterized by a sharp and permanent trend of population decline, a fact never seen before. Another cause turned out to be the liberalization of the international movement, which allowed the migration, especially for work purposes, of an increasing number of Romanians (Guran- Nica, 2015)

Another face of the demographic crisis, directly linked to the family crisis and its permanent growth since 1992, is demographic aging. This is one of the characteristics of the Romanian population since the 20th century. The current situation places Romania among the European countries with a marked aging trend (Guran-Nica, 2015)

A population that had known full employment as well as terrible living conditions during the Ceaușescu's government put all their hope of recovery in opening up to a new economy and political model. However, in this eastern part of Europe, the negative effects of globalization acquired unusual dimensions. The establishment of capitalism, far from being gradual, constituted a sudden leap from socialism to savage capitalism (Bernal, 2011; Ciuciuman, 2019).

Specifically, following Gabor (2015), Copșa Mică presents in 1992 a structural population based on the following ethnic groups: Romanians-3675, represent 68.96%, Hungarian-773, represent 14.5%, Romi people 808, represent 15.15%, Germans-71, represent 1.33%, and other nationalities represent 0.07%. The population is mainly working class, representing 74.4% of the population, with 5,332 inhabitants. Compared to 1989, the number of inhabitants fell to 27% of the general population.

Table 2*Population by nationality*

1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2002	2012
5.407 h	6581 h	6764 h	6938 h	6977 h	6581 h	5229 h	5374 h	5142 h

(Gabor, 2015)

Practices and representations of the older inhabitants of the Copșa Mică area

Copșa Mică is a city populated by former industrial workers, whose toxic work environment allowed them to retire early, aged 45/50, and they have continued to live in the same place ever since. From the paradigm shift, and as a result of itself, begins to take shape the abandonment and lack of interest shown by the Romanian State, as well as the loneliness produced by the departure of the younger generations, after the wave of migrations that occurred in the country starting in 1989. This meant a worsening of the physical and mental conditions of the people who stayed in this place, exacerbated by living in a toxic environment.

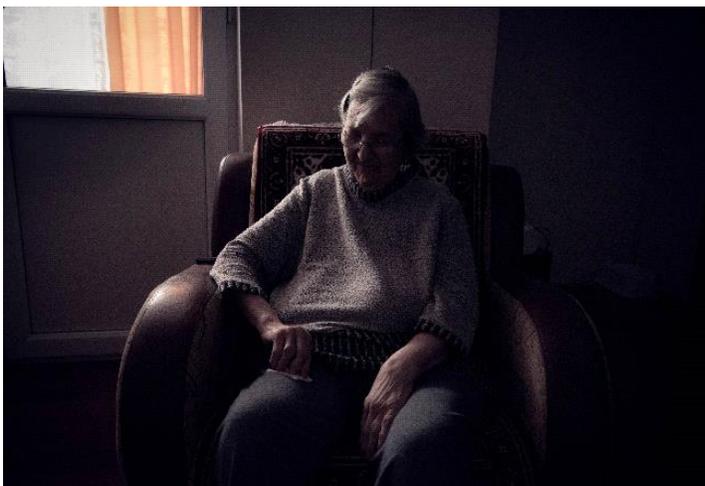
In the in-depth interviews and life stories of the informants, the causes and consequences of some invisible ailments emerge (since those visible in the biomedical aspect are consequences of the toxic industrialization of the area). The common questions start from something more general, more situational, about what life was like in Copșa Mică, to put their social perceptions in context. Most of the population in the area (which is considered an industrial place) comes from peasant and agricultural families, and they settled both in Copșa Mică and in some neighboring rural villages such as Axente, Șeica Mică, Târnăvioara, Micasasa.

The following photographs were taken during the ethnographic work and they are presented as an introduction, to give rise to the different narratives and interpretations of people.

Image 1 (Photograph made by the author, 2020)



Image2 (Photographs taken of the inhabitants by the author, 2020)





During the in-depth interviews and life stories, most of the informants started with their own perceptions of the world, what life was like in the communist stage, how they saw reality, what it was previously called Block 1, here are some examples:

"We were united people, even more so because we were farmers, people helped each other, if there was a problem they would immediately come and help you, people gave a lot, when something was needed, any neighbor would come to see what was happening ... they were some people ... they weren't nowadays people who are always stressed, they were more united, they helped each other, do you understand? (...) When we had a difficulty at home or something similar, we supported each other, among friends and family, before you say help me! (...) When I lived in my parents' house, you could see the good soul in people's eyes, my neighbor Costantin always asked me: " lady Lascu, don't you need any help today?" They worried about me, every day ... We went to dance with each other in the park, at the cultural center, we had parties on Sundays with friends, there were many of us, so beautiful, from house to house, an indestructible harmony, a good mentality, collective, helper... those times were the best of my life." (Lânuta, 70 years)

"Copșa before, during communism, worked very well, the economy was quite powerful, a lot of money was made, people were very happy ... people had everything they wanted, a house, a car, health was public (...) But look, I give you an example, when I was in the fourth year of chemistry, our cook had the house near the school, and she told us one day "look girls what I bring you for the weekend" - we were in a boarding school - and suddenly he took out of some bags a lot of food, tomatoes, lettuce, eggs, cozonac, and he invited us to his house ... people were very good at that time, and there was a lot of unity, but now ... we spent some nice time on important days

like Christmas, Easter, Sfintul Gheorghe, from house to house and get distracted but ... these times are gone ... they are gone ... " (Filomena, 73 years)

"There are many words to define the past, but one was responsibility, the responsibility of each other, things were thought and done, without discussion (...) If they gave you something, you knew that you had to give something back, nothing was free ... if I want to be the best I have to learn, if I want to have money I have to work (...) Another thing that I miss is the word, at the individual level and the level of society, respecting what you say (...) was another life, a lot better than now, it made you stronger above all else, it made you see things more maturely too, you had to pay attention to your parents, your older brother and your grandparents, always ... now people lie to you, they look for other things. Now they have other things, before if someone gave you their word, it was their word, it was something sacred (...) Many times when I dream, I dream when Copșa was in all its splendor, for good and for bad, I grew up there ... in those blocks, in each apartment there were 3 or 4 children, I used to hang out with their parents, we played all the games, elastic, hide-and-see, cards, with the ball, with the bicycle, we picked fruits from the trees in the meadows, we walked through all the meadows here ... there was a cultural center, a large cafeteria, musicians came to dance popular music ... I can not believe the present times, we have gone very fast with everything, totally contrary to the values that I grew up with, how can it be such a fast and abrupt change? Where are the values that we were raised on?" (Adela, 56 years)

On the other hand, in Block 2 the attention was focused on the collapse and revolution of the 89, and the impact it had on the inhabitants, how did it affect them, and the closure of the factories.

"There were many people here in the area, many many... we were 7,0000 workers (...) Romania entered the European Union and they wanted to destroy us (...) The revolution was a shock, what they did to Ceaușescu seemed horrible to me, with his good and bad things, and suddenly the factories were closed, and I imagined that the worst was yet to come ... I was at home and I saw it on television, but it affected me a lot when they shot him, as if he were an animal, and From there to where we are today, the country, the country and us are not doing well! Because of what happened, my only daughter is in Germany, a great shame..." (Ilie, 70 years)

"Me and my husband retired just weeks after the Revolution, this in December ... when the factories were closed everything broke down, there was nothing left, not even the hospital where I worked, they all left, we did not leave because we entered, as I told you, in retirement and the problems were over, but of course, when you get older there come other problems that you don't know ... the small hospital here doesn't have the necessary resources to take good care of us, we have to go to Mediaș to get tests done, electrocardiogram , electrogram... This life has passed, I still don't even know how... here I knew everyone, as I worked in the hospital, I met a lot of people, every time you left home or work, you talked to someone, you met your best friend on the street, now if I leave home, I don't know anyone (...) with the pension that I earn now I can survive, enough for what little I have... now there is no work, so there is no one here..." (Veronica, 85 years)

"I worked in the same place for 20 years, then I retired ... On the day of the Revolution, we did not know what to do, whether to be happy, angry, we did not know much, we were curious about what would happen, what the future will be like! how will it be (...) we thought it was going to be something good, good... but we were never going to imagine that it was going to be worse than in Ceaușescu's time, we didn't think about this matter! That you do not have a job, that you do not have a house, that you have to leave the country to find a life for yourself ... it is not so good abroad either ... at that time you did not think I have to go find my life, as it happened to my

daughter Alina (...) when the factories were closed it was a disaster, people did not protest, people were very sad, the director called us all and told us that the factories were going to be closed for a period, but he was also crying, because he knew that what he was saying was not going to be like that, he told us that they were going to close and then they would reopen, as you know it never opened ... and the director died, possibly of sadness (...) Therefore, people did not know what to do, how to eat, they retired all of us suddenly, for living in a toxic environment and for ending the regime, we did not know what to do next, but those who did not have to retire yet had to find another job quickly." (Petra, 68 years)

Finally in Block 3, it were encompassed the consequences of the change. How did it affect life? What changes were there, which ones were maintained? What values have changed? How is life now? Do you suffer from loneliness? This was a turning point, from here what has been said above is linked and interrelated. It cannot see the blocks as static compartments, but rather they are liquid interpretations that give meaning to their reality. Here are some examples:

"People are cold, they are no longer what we once were, we made ourselves bad people from one day to the next, when people have something they keep it for themselves and does not share it! Now you can drop dead in this town and no one will come to help you get up, not even look at you (...) a lot of envy, and in this town there is nothing to do... where are you going? ... my sister Maria is alone, her children all migrated and there is no one to take care of her, where is the public health that we had for the care of these people? And our children? She does not want to enter a recovery center, they are very expensive, her pension does not allow it either, realize that they are like 200 euros in your country, per month! And because she does not feel comfortable with the methodology of these centers either, and as Maria there are many here who are alone and with a fairly small pension, life is very hard now, but people have changed, I tell you ... this means democracy." (Ana, 80 years)

"Life here is now unpleasant, a lot of loneliness, there are very few people left ... the few people that remain are old and we don't even go out on the street, there is no longer the youth that was before, when you are young you see life differently, when you get old and you see that you have few things left, you touch and feel that life is ending (...) we can go here to a nursing home, but they do not have the optimal conditions, it does not give us the money either, we are not used to this socialization, we prefer family, that's how it always was! So we get old, we get old, we get old until we die. Probably, in years and years, there will be no people in this place, and it will disappear. The people that remain here are the pensioners, and the young people left, so I imagine that this place will disappears completely." (Petra, 68 years)

"Now it is my turn, now it is my turn to die, but I tell you that dying does not weigh on me, what do I have in this life? I have nothing left ... my husband, my parents, my daughter are gone ... My last request to God is to get to bed and not get up anymore, that's the last thing I ask, and when the woman from the service, who sometimes does the shopping, comes she will find me sleeping soundly in bed. I already told her: "Look If you find me in bed, what you have to do is bury me in the cemetery, and you keep the house because I have no one to give it to, so you will keep it" (...) The factories were closed and there is nothing else, nor my beloved canteen, I danced, ate, fell in love, everything in the canteen, everything is abandoned here ... there is no one here, my daughter cried to go to Spain, she did not want, did not want ... and in the end her destiny was death, but what are we going to do? it is very difficult ..." (Maria, 82 years)

"Copşa right now is a garbage dump, the state was not able to create decent living conditions for those who stayed, drinking water is a super important task and here we are, we have to collect drinking water from the source to make coffee, clean vegetables or drink water, I

have not reached the age of my father but for their generation, with all the physical problems they have, going to collect water day by day does kill you ... and those who stayed here and are still working, we have to go to Sibiu to work, with all that implies." (Viorica, 55 years)

"They suffer, without discussion, they suffer, but not because of a financial problem, I don't think that's why, I think it's more of a psychic and spiritual problem, of course, they are alone, without children. If the couple is there, it may be fine, because they accompany each other, they talk to their children through social networks, but when there is only one left, the depression is clear... they get up alone, the children abroad, they do not know how to handle some technological things, it is difficult ... and there are many like that (...) it is a big problem here, because we all know that the children will not come back. For them right now the most important social determinant for health is the accompaniment, and specially when you have a certain age (...) I get patients who tell me that their body hurts, they do not have an integral family here, it is a constant case (...) for example, they are worst during the holidays, and of course, nobody wants to leave from here! Why? Because they think that they will not adapt, I also suppose that it will be more difficult, another rhythm of life in Western Europe, and specially in the cities (...) For example, something they tell me a lot is that when they go to see their children abroad, they do not feel any type of pain, both head and knee, any illness, tension, nothing, do you understand? Then they come here, and it's another story..." (Anica, 55 years)

In these narratives, the feelings of loneliness, abandonment and anguish were approached from the blaming of the paradigm shift of 1989. Thus, Romania entering "democracy" became a country accelerated by the market economy, increasingly individualistic and neglecting community and reciprocity values.

Doctor's Anica explanation was important and key in the understanding of the Explanatory Models (EMs), which are the notions about an episode of disease and its possible therapeutic action used by all those involved in the clinical process (Kleiman, 1980, as cited in Martínez, 2008)

These interpretations of affliction are not independent of their socio-historical and political-economic context but are mixed, as a consequence of their social and material conditions. As Ángel Martínez (2008) would say, it is a priority for medical anthropology to recover the voice of those who have suffered, their values and their representations throughout the analytical process. Old age is led from the narratives of grief and the chain of social and structural inequalities.

Discussions

The WHO (1948) defines health as "a state of a complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not only the absence of affections or diseases"

Regarding old age, what can we do to ensure that its agency and politicization do not make invisible the dependency, the need for special care, and the fragility of a certain number of seniors? What can we do to avoid getting lost in generality and prevent the victimization of the elderly at the same time? (Gómez-Rubio, 2019, p. 73). These questions are framed to give way to old-age-care-independence relationships.

The study by Rada (2018) shows that it is preferred for the Romanian family to take care of their own elderly people, as in the Mediterranean model, unlike European North where state support is preferred. There is an invisible law in Europe that dictates to adult children the caring and support of their elderly parents, altruism and reciprocity are involved in these support flows. More or less support is needed depending on the increase in life expectancy (Künemund, Motel-Klingebiel, & Kohli, 2005, as cited in Rada, 2018). On the other hand, from an anthropological perspective, Europe is not the only space where the cultural norms of filial duties are still present

and solid. The flow of intergenerational support from adult children to parents is manifest in many traditional patriarchal societies, for example, East Asia. But in those cases where children are not able to assist their elders, as it is Copsa Mică's situation, the state should promote social action and new models of care to prevent citizens to suffer from social isolation or loneliness.

Loneliness accelerates the entire degenerative process of a person and causes ravages on their abilities. According to Meyer (2021), loneliness is not simply a specific side of sadness, rather a public health problem that deteriorates all aspects of a human's well-being.

In the in-depth interviews and life stories, it was found that the paradigm shift and the strong migration, early retirement, life in a toxic environment are some social and cultural determinants of signs and symptoms that affect the elderly causing loneliness, abandonment, depression, and unstable health at a subjective and emotional level, being marked risk factors in people's health. In addition, during the participant observation, I was involved in the daily life of older people, walks, breakfasts, board games, sharing a glass of wine, etc. Presence is also an act of care, as well as mindfulness, and, above all, listening. It is essential for emotional care, which as Puig (2021) explains, cannot be separated from the physical task, since the two are united in the depths of daily life. Care is connections, a process of meanings. The experience of caring is linked to the concept of vulnerability and thus brings us closer to social responsibility. It is a political position that places value on caring for and criticizes the neoliberal policy that considers it a "defect" (Puig, 2021) and that fits people as individuals, with decision-making power, and autonomy. That is why there is a need for speech and conversation in these interpersonal relationships, and they should support any human practice. Caring is, then, sweeping and talking (Puig, 2021, p. 50)

The research is developed on the social context of peasant families in rural villages, so it is necessary to point out the inequalities and the scarce social and material resources they possess. These factors also influence negative aging development and, therefore, the need for care increases, and that is why a response by the State and the World Market must be ensured through public policies which facilitate the last stage in life, as well as proposing neighborhood and community solidarity.

Conclusions

Social isolation should be avoided through the civic and cultural participation of older people in society.

It is essential, from a social aspect, to develop strategies and programs to stimulate cooperation and mutual support of the elderly and young people with resources such as volunteering. On the one hand, children and young people need role models and mentors who share their life experience with and, on the other hand, the elderly need the support of the young. Education is important to avoid negative age-related stereotypes, both because they have the potential to strengthen prejudice or discrimination against older people, and because they influence people to develop patterns of behavior, thinking and emotions that confirm this negative stereotype (Rada, 2018). It is about the integration and participation of older people in society, the adoption of measures to promote successful aging, the promotion of intergenerational relationships based on cooperation (Rada, 2018). As Soronellas and Comas D'Argemir (2021) point out, in recent years the aging process has changed and modified essential aspects of social life. This process has been diluted over time and involves new perceptions of the life stage, new social and family dynamics, such as the transformation of gender roles, care needs and public policies aimed at the elderly (Attias-Donfut & Segalen, 2007, as cited in Soronellas & Comas D'Argemir, 2021)

Copșa Mică and Romania in general, have before them a crucial challenge to face in the future years, and it is to break with this outdated model of putting older people aside and, instead of making them part of an active and political society, increase their social participation and be considered active subjects for the transformation of life. Obviously, this will not be possible without socioeconomic and cultural resources, as well as the return of family networks or the creation of new networks that intervene in interdependent relationships.

Ethical considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant at the time of recruitment. The subjects were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage, and permission was obtained to analyze the content with scientific teams.

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