

## SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND PERSONAL GROWTH IN LATER LIFE: THE EXPERIENCES OF OLDER ADULTS LIVING ALONE

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**Abstract.** *In the present study, adopting the theory of lifespan development, personal growth in later life is explored in the context of social participation. Personal growth in later life as a developmental task of the life-stage may be expressed in adjustment to changes in one's social environment. The aim of the present study is to examine the significance of social participation for personal growth of older people living alone. The research questions are: How do older people living alone perceive and respond to their social participation opportunities? How do they make use of those opportunities for personal growth? The empirical findings of the present study show the development of age-related coping strategies by older adults living alone in response to their social participation experiences.*

**Keywords:** *older adults, personal growth in later life, social participation.*

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### Introduction

Many studies in later life development emphasize activity of older adults, which proposes social participation and learning in later life. The negative image of ageing as inactivity is replaced by a positive image of older adults as autonomous individuals, maintaining their independence by taking responsibility for and care of their lives themselves and actively influencing their aging conditions (Marhankova, 2011). In gerontological theory older persons' social activity is generally connected with psychosocial development in later life, and there is considerable empirical evidence demonstrating that there is a relationship between social participation and social functioning and well-being in later life. Active social participation may be motivated by the desire to remain in control of their life in the situation of independent living and respective instrumental reasons of mastering the aging needs-related life skills. Older adults may need to develop new strategies for continued social participation with new roles in both their immediate social environment and wider community or society context. Mastering new technologies may be stimulated by the need to remain in control of their social environment. It may also be linked with development of mastery in health behaviours. The aim of the present study is to examine the significance of social participation for personal growth of older people living alone. The research questions are: How older people living alone perceive and respond to their social participation opportunities? How they make use of those opportunities for personal growth?

The theoretical and methodological framework of the research includes: (a) older adults' social participation concept (Levasseur, Richard, Gauvin & Raymond, 2010; Aroogh & Shahboulaghi, 2020; Hashidate, Shimada, Fujisawa & Yatsunami, 2021); (b) the lifespan development theory of ageing (Havighurst, 1972; Baltes, 1987, 1997; Baltes & Baltes, 1990) as a perspective to view personal growth in later life. This approach to social gerontology studies may allow better understanding of social activity of older adults by offering a psychological and sociological perspective on personal development in later life. The lifespan perspective allows to view aging as a continuous adaptive process of balancing gains and losses (Baltes, 1987) facilitated by use of particular strategies.

**Novelty and significance of the study.** This study contributes to empirical knowledge of the links between social behaviour and personal growth in later life. Research findings contribute to a better understanding of the meaning older adults attribute to social participation, and the contribution of social participation experience to their personal growth.

### **Theoretical background: Social participation as a context for personal growth in later life**

**Personal growth in the perspective of lifespan development.** The dynamics between restrictions in the social environment and personal growth in later life may be explored by positing the analysis of social participation of older adults in the perspective of developmental tasks including generativity and ego-integrity (Erikson, 1982; E. Erikson, J. Erikson & Kivnick, 1986), achieving self-actualization (Maslow, 1970), adopting social roles and adjustment of living arrangements (Havighurst, 1972), and maintaining the current state and regulating loss (Baltes, 1987, 1997). The social behaviours adopted by older adults develop into specific patterns depending on the context and individual circumstances (Baltes, 1997). Growth as an outcome of development may be defined as “behaviours involved in reaching higher levels of functioning or adaptive capacity” (Baltes, 1997, p. 369). The developmental tasks as related to social life, following Havighurst’s (1972) conceptualization, include adoption of and adaptation to social roles, connecting with one’s peers, adjusting living arrangements with respect to decreasing strength and health. In line with lifespan developmental theory, succeeding in developmental tasks may compensate for age-related losses and enable an older person to maintain an adequate level of functioning.

Many theoretical and empirical studies published in the recent decades show that social participation in the context of changes/losses in later life may be viewed in the perspective of developmental (lifespan) theory (Utz, Carr, Nesse & Wortman, 2002; Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Hutteman, Hennecke, Orth, Reitz, & Specht, 2014; Lange & Grossman, 2014; Lofgren, Larsson, Isaksson & Nyman, 2022). Older people direct their way in social environments using social selection, and may attain wellbeing by selectively using their cognitive resources (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). Approaching aging from this psychosocial perspective allows to consider the impact of social relationships, activity and status in a society on the older person’s adaptive ability (Lange & Grossman, 2014). The degree of accomplishment of developmental tasks is associated with the personality maturation, which may explain differences in dealing with challenges and developmental tasks experiences (Hutteman et al., 2014, p. 268). Developmental tasks in later life may be associated with the expectations that society holds for this life-stage (Hutteman et al., 2014). Therefore, social attitudes to an old age may have an effect not only on the perception of social roles, but also on the social participation (Lange & Grossman, 2014). Older persons may adapt to changes by developing strategies to create social participation experiences (Lofgren et al., 2022). The strategies older persons adopt to prioritize meaningful activity may be associated with the regulatory skills developed through experience (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). The perspective of developmental tasks emphasizes an active role of the individual in producing the desirable changes and successfully mastering the challenges rather than adopting a reactive approach to life changes (Hutteman et al., 2014, p. 268). An active lifestyle may be internalized by older adults shaping their self-conception, attitudes to aging and stimulating their engagement in social activity (Marhankova, 2011). Accomplishment of personal goals and personal development are the outcomes of social participation, which also allow an older person to contribute to society (Levasseur et al., 2010, p. 5) Social participation in later life may present both opportunities for engagement in activities, which older people find meaningful, and opportunities for developing and

maintaining important roles and relationships, especially helping others (Levasseur et al., 2010, p. 5).

**Social participation in later life.** Although social participation has been identified as an important determinant of healthy or successful ageing, in gerontological literature, the definition and dimensions of social participation in later life have not reached a consensus yet (Levasseur et al., 2010; Aroogh & Shahboulaghi, 2020; Hashidate et al., 2021). Related concepts are used interchangeably including social connectedness, social engagement, social network or community involvement.

Social participation may be defined as “involvement in activities providing interactions with others in society or the community” (Levasseur et al., 2010, p. 2141). Thus, it has two main dimensions – involvement, social activities and interactions. Social participation may be defined as conscious active engagement in social activities involving interaction with other people and sharing resources, which leads to gaining personal satisfaction (Aroogh & Shahboulaghi, 2020, p. 66). The socially oriented nature of older adults’ social participation is evident in connecting with other people, helping and collaborating, and making one’s contribution to society (Hashidate et al., 2021, p. 87). Levasseur and colleagues (2010) identify nine domains including “learning and application of knowledge, general tasks, communication, mobility, self-care, domestic life, interpersonal interactions and relationships, major life areas, community and civic life” (Levasseur et al., 2010, p. 10). Social participation involves joining organizations (political, religious, charity, etc.), taking part in organized fitness and physical activities, attending cultural activities (libraries, art galleries, theatre, cinema, museums, concerts), engaging in productive activities (babysitting, caring for people in need of assistance), involvement in social activities like going out and meeting friends, and entertainment (eating out or travelling) (Aroogh & Shahboulaghi, 2020, p. 66-67). Connecting, being or interacting with others may be motivated by a specific activity associated with helping people or otherwise making one’s contribution to society (Levasseur et al., p. 2141).

Interaction with the social environment is central to determine the level of social participation, which may be “affected by political, economic and community contexts” (Levasseur et al., 2010, p. 11). The determining factors include access to and availability of resources, the level of social support and communication, social security and social policies towards older people’s participation in relation to age discrimination (Aroogh & Shahboulaghi, 2020, p. 66-67). In their study of individual and contextual factors on social participation of older people in Europe, Molina, Cañadas-Reche and Serrano-del-Rosal (2018) identified that participation is influenced by the age, cognitive functioning, the level of education and self-perceived health. The individual factors related to age, health disorders, motivation, socioeconomic status were identified as determining the level of social participation (Aroogh & Shahboulaghi, 2020; Townsend, Chen & Wuthrich, 2021). Ageism experiences may be perceived as restricting opportunities for older persons to act socially. Ageism is generally associated with the factors negatively affecting older person’s behaviours, and leading to loneliness, exhibiting deficits in social interactions and relationships and limited social participation in later life (Shiovitz-Ezra, Shemesh & McDonnell/Naughton, 2018; Park & Chang, 2024). Ageist attitudes in society may be expressed in negative old age stereotypes and attitudes towards older people, which may also be internalized by the older persons themselves (Shiovitz-Ezra et al., 2018; Garrido, Conde, Vázquez & Rodríguez, 2022). There is empirical evidence showing that negative stereotypes of incompetence in later life may reduce social sphere of older people (Shiovitz-Ezra et al., 2018). Older persons may perceive “social rejection” – feeling unwanted, and therefore adopting social withdrawal attitudes (Shiovitz-Ezra et al., 2018).

**Social participation and personal growth in the context of reduced social environment.** An older adult’s experiences combine aging change and growth which is

embodied in the development of a behavioural pattern of coping with the effects of ageing-related losses/changes including a reduced social environment. Those people who live alone may engage in a more active social participation as a coping strategy to combat loss-related distress (Utz et al., 2002). Utz and colleagues (2002) studied social participation of widowed older persons, demonstrating behavioural patterns of resilience and adjustment to the loss by increasing social activity and engaging in community life (p. 530). The aforementioned study showed that the adjustment process is determined by availability of resources of psychological, interpersonal and economic nature. Constraints on resources may have a negative effect on the level of social activity (Utz et al., 2002). Higher levels of social activity may be facilitated by development and improvement of social relations, older people seeing themselves as part of a community and society (Lofgren et al., 2022).

There are empirical studies showing a link between loneliness and a reduced level of social participation of older adults (Utz et al., 2002; Goll, Charlesworth, Scior & Stott, 2015; Shiovitz-Ezra et al., 2018; Shorey & Chan, 2021; Oppert et al., 2023). Adults living alone may experience social isolation due to restricted contacts, or disengagement from society (Oppert et al., 2023). Goll and colleagues' (2015) study of older adults living independently in England found that lonely older adults may develop behavioural patterns avoiding social opportunities just because of fearing rejection or loss of some of their identity (Goll et al., 2015). Lone older adults may have to balance inclusion with autonomy when seeking adaptation in their engagement in social interaction. However, social participation may reduce loneliness and promote health experiences (Lofgren et al., 2022). Feeling included in community and feeling important to other people is experienced as significant factors contributing to feeling part of society (Lofgren et al., 2022).

Older adults' social participation may be stimulated by needs satisfaction or ensuring survival (Levasseur et al., 2010, p. 5). There are studies showing that those older people who face social isolation may actively seek ways to reduce it. Older adults develop strategies to create social participation opportunities seeking for adaptation to life changes (Lofgren et al., 2022). To maintain social participation, older adults take initiative to develop social relations, engage in social activities as well as stay connected with community (Lofgren et al., 2022). Avoiding the feeling of being excluded motivates an older person to use media to stay informed (Lofgren et al., 2022) and use digital technology as an instrument helping social connection and management of life situations (Oppert et al., 2023; Park and Chang, 2024). Using technologies to keep in touch with friends, relatives, and dealing with life tasks may help reduce loneliness (Astasio-Picado, Cobos-Moreno, Gómez-Martín, Verdú-Garcés & Zabala-Baños, 2022). However, access to technologies may be lowered by insufficient knowledge and fear related to security of personal data.

Creating opportunities for social participation requires to make choices of activities and relations determined by the older person's environment (Lofgren et al., 2022). Older adults develop strategies to maintain the level of social participation adjusting to the changing and challenging circumstances (Lofgren et al., 2022). In the review of studies of isolated lonely older people, Shorey and Chan (2021) argue that older adults who lack family support use coping strategies including social engagement with peers and increasingly rely on religion. However, some older people may not acknowledge the developmental task of affiliation with one's peers (Havighurst, 1972) as a necessary concern and they may even avoid connecting with their age group to stay away from negative age-related association (Hutteman et al., 2014, p. 274).

## Methodology of the Research

The qualitative research paradigm was adopted to achieve the main purpose of the research - to evaluate the significance of social participation for personal growth of elderly people.

**Composition of the research group.** The participants were selected purposively based on the criteria of age between 70 and 85 and living in a single person household. There were eight participants including six women and two men. The educational background included tertiary education (university, institute or academy) (n=7) and vocational education (n=1). The participants were residents of both urban and rural areas in Lithuania including the cities of Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda and Klaipeda district. Such composition of participants was chosen in order to ensure the principle of diversity in terms of gender, education, and area of residence. In the light of this research, it is difficult to name a single unambiguous reason why people live alone, i.e. it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between a conscious personal choice and external circumstances. Studies show an increasing trend in Lithuania and Europe of older people living alone (Mikulionienė, Rapolienė & Valavičienė, 2018), with a higher frequency of women living alone.

**Data collection and analysis.** The research data were collected in the form of a qualitative, semi-structured interview. This method prevents researchers from imposing any opinions and biases on the participants and allows them to obtain an authentic narrative from the people who live alone and face a risk of weakening social ties (Wong, Chau, Fang & Woo, 2017). The interviews were conducted in January to August, 2024. Guided by the aim of the research, questions were planned in advance and based on theoretical observations and conclusions about the significance of social ties for personal growth of elderly people (Slokenberga & Zepa, 2013; Rapolienė, 2015; Mikulionienė et al., 2018). The survey was conducted in-person at the participants' homes, which allowed the researchers to introduce themselves to every participant personally, to review the terms of the person's participation agreement and the researchers' responsibility for fair usage of personal data. Upon obtaining the participant's consent, the interviews were recorded. There were no issues with participants motivation and willingness to answer the questions, as none of them expressed a need to terminate the interview. The research integrity was ensured by applying the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were ensured that the research data would be used in a generalised manner, which would prevent identification. The research followed the guidance provided by European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2018) such as reliability, honesty, respect and accountability. The data were recorded, grouped and analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method (Žydzīūnaitė & Sabaliauskas, 2017).

## Research Results

Irrespective of the circumstances, an older person's living alone is at least partly caused by 'life on the sideways', i.e. distancing oneself from the society/community. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked if they viewed themselves as full members of their community. Five respondents answered positively, two participants 'partly agreed' and one participant did not have a clear opinion. The presumption that living alone causes exclusion from society (Rapolienė, Mikulionienė, Gedvilaitė – Kordušienė & Jurkevits, 2018) was only partly confirmed by our research, because the participants reported active involvement in various social activities and events, which was also confirmed by other results of the present study. The results show (Table 1) that the participants in the present study achieve self-fulfillment by engaging in useful activities (e.g. volunteering), helping others (e.g. supporting people affected by the war in Ukraine), participating in public events (e.g. singing in a church

choir; participating in the events of a society for disabled persons). The participants who are not involved in social life, experience social exclusion associated with failing health and decrease in personal capabilities and needs.

*Table 1 Social participation experiences of older adults living alone*

Category	Sub-category	Supporting statements
Social participation	Active participation	<i>Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, I've been involved in social activity. I interact with refugees, who received asylum in our city. I share foods, clothes and household articles. I receive great spiritual satisfaction by doing that.</i>
		<i>I've donated some money for the people, who fled their homes because of the war, though, not much.</i>
		<i>Yes, I do a lot of work for charity. I have personal connections with them as they live in our neighbourhood.</i>
		<i>I do volunteering.</i>
	Limited participation	<i>I sometimes volunteer for the 'Maria's radio'.</i>
		<i>When my health allows it, I sing in the church choir.</i>
		<i>I participate in the events for the disabled when asked.</i>
	Non-participation	<i>I don't go anywhere because of bad health and being hard up</i>
		<i>My introverted character must be at fault here, and also absence of peers and like-minded people</i>

The participants were asked what prevents or encourages their engagement with social life. The motives for social participation included willingness to communicate with members of a small social group: *"I try, as much as I can, to meet my friends of similar age"*, *"I invite my relatives to come over because for me [travelling] becomes more difficult"*; encouragement by family members, even if they live separately: *"I'm constantly encouraged by my daughter and granddaughter. They call me to ask if I have been outside, or have seen something new"*; willingness to participate in the events organized by a religious community: *"I want to take part in Mass and other religious events because I have my faith"*; an inherent need to be socially useful and help others: *"I help others as much as I can. I donate to orphans, I help refugees that escaped the war in Ukraine, I donate to the poor"*; a need for self-expression: *"I still sing in the church choir"*, *"I like to play the accordion on special occasions when invited"*. The barriers preventing the participants from more active participation are related to old age stereotypes and negative attitudes towards elderly people: *"Nowadays, our society is dominated by the cult of youth and we [elderly people] are useless"*, *"The society perceives us as weak, sick and bad-tempered"*; lack of material and personal resources: *"I live on a verge of poverty, I cannot afford to go anywhere"*, *"my weak body prevents me from getting involved"*.

Although in scientific literature the issue of social exclusion itself is generally frequently addressed, many authors write about inclusion as a possible solution (Zhu & Walker, 2019). In the context of this research, narratives by elderly people who live alone provide an important insight into their self-perception, as they explain how elderly people see themselves as members of society and are related to both exclusion and inclusion. Though the data of the research represent the elderly people who live alone, many elderly people who do not live in single households may also find the experiences relatable.

All in all, communication with one's peers, volunteering, participation in religious services and other cultural events are the most common forms of social ties among the participants of the present study. However, lack of financial resources, living alone, weak health and limited social interactions may increase social exclusion. Moreover, overcoming it by one's individual effort is extremely difficult. The results of this research correlate with the

conclusions made by Rapolienė (2015), who observes that the attitude of Lithuanian population towards the elderly is controversial - despite declarative respect, in the society there is still some discrimination and negative stereotypes associated with psychological and functional capabilities of elderly people: “weak health is common among older people”; “they often get sick”; “they think and move slowly”; “they are lonely and conservative”; “they do not like novelty or change”.

According to the Active Aging Index (2018), compared to other EU countries, in Lithuania, the indicators of sustainable aging are not high. Lithuanian older adults tend to be passive when it comes to education and self-improvement. The main reasons that hinder elderly people from learning are age and lack of finances. The respondents were asked what competences they would like to acquire that could help them to be more actively involved with social life. The differences in their opinions are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2 Competences that elderly people would like to acquire*

Category	Sub-category	Supporting statements
Desired competences	Physical activity and healthy lifestyle	<i>I would love to exercise more, be more active. I have a lot of health problems and I am afraid to harm myself.</i>
		<i>I lack knowledge about health strengthening; how to strengthen weak muscles, how I can harden my body, what vitamins I should take.</i>
	Information and communication technology	<i>I want to learn how to register on e-sveikata (e-health) platform, I wish I was better at using online banking.</i>
		<i>My daughter keeps encouraging me to buy medicine online; she has shown me how to do it, but I still can't do it. I wish I was better at using Messenger, because I could communicate with my daughter for free.</i>
		<i>I would love to learn how to pay bills and taxes online.</i>
	Information management	<i>It is difficult for me to find necessary information, e.g. what events are available or where to buy tickets, because I have cancelled my newspaper subscriptions.</i>
		<i>It is often mentioned on TV and radio; yet I would like to learn the specifics and don't know how to do it.</i>
		<i>I want to learn how to find information about taxes, benefits etc.</i>

The results show that the participants of the research have a high motivation for improving competences that correlate to their needs and abilities. Aging-related issues may be solved by people investing in knowledge, skills and abilities through their entire life. Lifelong learning is stimulated by the changing career and education opportunities (Green Paper on Aging: Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations, 2021). Enjoyable activities are distinguished as one of major premises for successful aging as involvement in enjoyable activities allows people to be satisfied with their lives and everyday routines (Jankūnaitė & Naujanienė, 2012).

The research aimed to find out what social activities are attractive for the participants, in particular, the activities which could improve their health together with providing opportunities to feel positive, optimistic and to experience personal growth. The answers were divided into the following groups of activities (Table 3).

*Table 3 Social activities attractive to elderly people*

Category	Sub-category	Supporting statements
Social activities	Expansion of social network	<i>I wish I could participate in the events organized by the institution I used to work for</i>
		<i>I wish I could join various activities for elderly people in the neighbourhood</i>
	Activities related to personal interests, hobbies and self-education	<i>I would like to go to the Third Age University.</i>
		<i>'I would like to participate in online courses that could help me with online activities such as registering on the e-health platform, online banking and other sites.</i>
		<i>I wish there was more education on the matters of protecting oneself from various fraudsters who tend to attack us, elderly people, quite a lot</i>
		<i>If I had more financial means, I could attend cultural events more often.</i>
		<i>I belong to the Society of Disabled Persons so I wish we had more trips, recreation by the sea</i>
	Activities related to productivity	<i>Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, I've always wanted to help them</i>
		<i>involvement in activities that help Ukrainian refugees, especially, children</i>
		<i>I wish I could do volunteering for 'Niekieno vaikai' ('Noone's children'); however, I was told I couldn't participate in some activities as I am too old</i>

All in all, the participants of the research wished for a more active and diverse social inclusion as they perceived it as a benchmark in social life, social ties and personal growth. The results suggest that the measures of intervention that could help to increase social participation of older adults living alone are necessary on all levels – personal, institutional, educational and societal.

### Conclusions

The life-course (lifespan development) theory as a psychosocial theory of ageing provides a useful approach to study social participation as a source and context of personal growth of lone people in later life. The context of personal growth may be linked to older adults' social participation in the perspective of personal growth in later life as a developmental task of the life-stage, which is expressed in adjustment to changes in one's social environment. The process of personal growth encompasses the dimensions of maintaining control over one's social environment in aging-restricted circumstances and development of adaptive strategies.

The analysis of the results has shown that most of the participants in the research, who are elderly people and live in a single household, are socially active and see themselves as part of a community and society. They generally have positive perceptions of their social environments as related to the opportunities for social activities. Social participation acts for them as a stimulating environment for personal growth, although they may acknowledge not taking advantage of all opportunities which their social environments provide. The reasons for lower level of participation are mainly associated with age-restricted circumstances, including age stereotypes and lack of material and personal resources. The participants also acknowledge their lack of competences in certain areas including active and healthy lifestyle, IT literacy, information management etc. and consequently distinguish certain fields, where they would

like to improve. Thus, older adults living alone may develop age-related coping strategies in response to their social participation experiences.

Although the qualitative research allows an in-depth understanding of the research problem, the interpretation of the results may be limited by a few factors. The small number of research participants may mean that not all possible experiences and views have been disclosed. Therefore, the results should be viewed as individual experiences not representative of a wider population. The purposive selection of the respondents (aged 70 to 85, living in a single person household) may mean limitation to the variety of the experiences. Although the principles of research reliability and objectivity were adhered to, the interpretive analysis was partly determined by the researchers' perspective and experience.

Considering the research results and limitations, future research may be directed towards the following perspectives: a larger scale qualitative or mixed research may be carried out involving larger and more varied groups of older adults, which would allow specification of the differences in the meaning of social relationships depending on such factors as age, gender, place of residence or social status; more attention could be given to specific forms of social relationships (family, friends, community organizations) and their individual meanings to personal growth of elderly people. Such thematic differentiation would allow a better understanding of which social relationships have the greatest impact on different aspects of personal growth (e.g. self-reflection, emotional wellbeing, acquisition of new skills).

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