

Research Articles

Nostalgia and Sentimentality Among Minority Elderly People (Bulgarian Roma People and Hungarians Living in Romania)

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Abstract

Nostalgia and sentimentality are very typical for the old age. There are some characteristics that are perceived as typical for the elderly people in the different cultures, such as being dependent, and needing long-term care. There are also some similarities between the population tendencies in Bulgaria and Romania. The simultaneous acceptance in European Union of both countries also suggests the existence of some similar attitudes towards the past among elderly minority people in both countries. The hypothesis of the study was that together with some similarities, the elderly people from both ethnic minorities in the two countries would differ cross-culturally in their sentimentality and nostalgia related to the past. Sentimentality and nostalgia in elderly minority people (26 Roma people in Bulgaria and 21 Hungarians in Romania) were measured by means of a questionnaire created by Gergov & Stoyanova (2013). The results indicated that the Hungarian minority in Romania was more sentimental and nostalgic than the Roma minority in Bulgaria. More thoughts about the past reported the minority young elders than the minority oldest old. The females from the minority groups were more sentimental than the males from the minority groups. Higher sentimentality and nostalgia among elderly Hungarians could be explained by their higher conservatism and more satisfaction with the historical past than Roma people. Roma people living in institutions felt a sense of stability in their present and they shared some positive expectations for the future.

Keywords: sentimentality, nostalgia, ethnic minority, elderly

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Introduction

Cross – cultural studies have their significant place in the history of social sciences. At the beginning of 20th century Wundt (2010) introduced in his Folk Psychology the term “national spirit”. Its semantic includes the genetic factor and cultural elements.

The basic task of cross-cultural studies is differentiation of the forms of behaviour and mental peculiarities that are determined by the environment and the culture. According to Mavrodiev (2004), the cultural determinism is related to the belief that culture controls the individual destiny. Culture could be dealt with as a framework for the personality. If the personality rebels against the culture, this conflict becomes a source of negative emotions and experience. Then the personality should restructure its inner space that is not easy to be achieved. On the other

hand, a person who has perceived and lived in a concrete culture cannot get rid of this culture. Culture will always pursue the personality. Culture is also an important factor for shaping some ethnic peculiarities.

Ethnic minorities are perceived as an aggregate of people with different values, beliefs, roles and attitudes (Ivanov, 2011). Some studies on ethnic identity reveal its main aspects – ethnic self-determination, sense of group belonging and pride of the in-group. The typical cultural customs, traditions, attitudes and experience, symbols, common history and language are the attributes of ethnic self-determination (Ganeva, 2010). Stamatov (2010) noticed that people inherited from their past a lot of self-determinations that created safety and self-acceptance. These self-determinations are important in the present life, too. Phinney and Tarver (1988) found that ethnic identity consolidated with age advance. Ethnic self-determination and self-consciousness that have been the target of personal emotional investments for many years could also be the possible sources of sentimentality and nostalgia in elderly people. Sentimentality and nostalgia are strongly expressed among some special categories of people such as elderly people (Gergov & Stoyanova, 2013) and they could be influenced by the ethnic belonging.

Elderly people need to reflect in private on their experiences, especially to recall their joys (Burgun, 1983). Nostalgia and sentimentality are mental phenomena that are very typical for the old age. Mental commitment to the past is a tendency that has been strengthened with the advance in age and it could be found in every individual human life. Living more and more years changes the event intensity of personal life in quantitative and content respect. This is a natural process that leads to conceptualization of the attitude towards self and social reality (Gergov & Stoyanova, 2013). As Petrov (1978) noticed, the increasing tendency of re-estimation of one's life path is present during the whole period of old age. This re-estimation is not passive, neither partial. It is an active and purposeful activity aiming to equilibrate the personality and its environment. By means of this re-estimation, the importance of personal experience increases, the values and norms are incorporated in the behavioural acts, the personality is re-integrated. Confirming this statement, Gradev (1987) marked that elderly people estimated more realistically the past events and how these events had influenced on their life path, as well as to what degree they personally had the possibility to influence on these events.

Mental relation to the past has two aspects. On the one hand, the present exerts a some kind of pressure on the past. The results from a study by Gradev (1987) indicated that 70% of people considered that some important past events for them had lost their initial value in the course of life. He explained this frequent opinion with shaking off from the initial emotional saturation and the loss of pathos. The events turn pale also when there are some present situations that impose a radical re-estimation of the past. In such cases, the memories of the past have been consciously re-constructed and some facts and events that do not correspond to the new personal life concept are suppressed.

Gradev (1987) outlined another aspect of the interaction past-present. According to him, there is a mechanism of enrichment of the memories whose source is the current life. Immanent personal inclination is to look for explanation of the important personal life events. In this way, even unconsciously, a pale memory is enriched with more and more interpretations and estimations that change the initial memory up to become unrecognizable.

Nostalgia is a deep attachment to the past (Jobson & Wickham-Jones, 2010), the preference of the goods and experiences from the past, a sentimental or bitter-sweet yearning for a product from the past (Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012). Nostalgia could be even related to the claims to land (Chan, 2011).

Nostalgia is related to sentimentality, to the pleasant act of recalling the past, and less - to the memory of wrongdoing (Sucharov, 2013). Nostalgia does not necessarily refer only to the pleasant past. Sometimes people recall the past as better than it actually was (Sucharov, 2013). An ironic nostalgic stance can help overcome the loss of a simplified and idealized past and thus better embrace the present (Sucharov, 2013).

Nostalgia asserts the lost potential of the past as missing in the presence. Nostalgia is a form of protest against the present because the nostalgic subject imagines an absent ideal. Nostalgia can also generate dissatisfaction. The desire in nostalgia is formed by the pressures of the present. The meaning of nostalgia could be a longing for one's home or a longing for one's youth, a longing for a past time, a longing that arose from a separation from one's ideal. Historical nostalgia is an idealized version of the past (Lynch, 2011).

Another opinion is that nostalgia is less an imagined ideal of the past than the potential of the past to shape the present (Barnes, 2011). Through nostalgia one continually revisits one's past to find oneself (Dinshaw, 2011).

Two types of nostalgia indicate the static and flexible modes of nostalgic response to the past. Restorative nostalgia seeks to rebuild a lost home, it is engaged in some projects of reconstruction and revival of the past monuments, events, etc. Reflective nostalgia is characterized by the dreams of another place and another time, ruminating over the impossibility of homecoming, of restoring the past (Dell, 2011; Graefe, 2011).

The extreme forms of nostalgia imply a general sense of melancholy. Nostalgia in its moderate forms is often a pleasant recalling of the past. Nostalgia contributes to a continuous sense of self, of positive self-regard, of solid identity, of a sense of meaning. Nostalgia could contain an intersubjective component — collective nostalgia links the in-group members to each other. For minorities whose personal and collective histories differ from those of the majority, this is especially important — both for linking the minorities to their past and for helping them adopt, to stave off loneliness and alienation by means of integrating a coherent identity (Sucharov, 2013).

Crucial to healthy nostalgia is one's awareness that the object of longing is gone. In pathological nostalgia, the past becomes a fixation, and one person or a group may feel guilt for past wrongs (Sucharov, 2013).

Reflective nostalgia is characterised by a sense of dissonance between what one privately longs for and what one publicly strives for, for example because of the fear of being labelled racist or xenophobic (Sucharov, 2013).

Rationale of the Study

There are some characteristics that are perceived as typical for the elderly people in the different cultures, such as being dependent, needing long-term care (Assous, 2001), especially the poor elderly people, women over age 85 (Minkler, 1997), and with disabilities (Rivlin & Wiener, 1988). Elderly people are less likely to use the Internet than the other age groups. Information technology allows members of the growing elderly population to remain independent longer (Niehaves & Plattfaut, 2014). Feeling oneself useful, maintaining higher levels of activities contributes to the maintenance of mental health in the elderly (Yazaki, 2002). Elderly ethnic minorities are often perceived by the whole society as more vulnerable to victimization or fear of victimization, unable to cope with harassment (Nelson & Griffiths, 2001).

There are also some similarities between the population tendencies in Bulgaria and Romania - dominant majorities (85% in Bulgaria and 89% in Romania), concentrated minorities (Turks in Bulgaria and Hungarians in Romania), a scattered minority group (Roma), and a multitude of smaller ethnic groups (Spirova & Budd, 2008, p. 86). The

simultaneously acceptance in European Union of both countries also suggests the existence of some similar attitudes towards the past among elderly minority people in both countries.

The hypothesis of the study was that together with some similarities, the elderly people from both ethnic minorities in the two countries would differ cross-culturally in their sentimentality and nostalgia related to the past.

Method

Sample Selection

The elderly people who participated in the study were selected purposefully to define themselves as members of Roma group in Bulgaria and as Hungarians in Romania. Their number was selected by means of using quota sampling.

370,908 were officially Roma people in Bulgaria in 2001 (Pamporov, 2008, p. 24). 325,343 were officially Roma people in Bulgaria in 2011 (Mediapool.bg, 2013; National Statistical Institute, 2014). 19.3% out of the whole Bulgarian population was in the age group 65 years and over (CIA World Factbook, as cited in Index Mundi, 2014a). There were not found any official data about the number of elderly Roma people, so the proportion was looked for as 19.3% out of 325,343, i.e. approximately 62,800 should be the population of elderly Roma people in Bulgaria.

15.4% were officially the elderly people in the age group 65 years and over in Romania (CIA World Factbook as cited in Index Mundi, 2014b). 1,237,746 were Hungarians in Romania in 2011 and 1,431,807 in 2002 (Horváth, 2014). There were not found any official data about the number of elderly Hungarians in Romania, so the proportion was looked for as 15.4% out of 1,237,746, i.e. approximately 190,600 should be the population of elderly Hungarians in Romania.

47 elderly people from the minorities were studied in Bulgaria and Romania. They were from 60 to 89 years old and they were divided into two age sub-groups - "young elders" (between 60–75 years old), and "the oldest old" - above 76 years old (Lambert-Shute & Fruhauf, 2011, p. 32).

The sample consisted of 21 participants from the Hungarian minority in Romania and 26 from the Roma minority group in Bulgaria. They participated voluntarily.

With the actual sample size of about 20 ethnic minority participants per country a 95% CI of 22 (Creative Research Systems, 2012) was achieved (for an expected result of 50%) and a bigger sample would have been better.

In Romania, 15 women and 6 men were studied. Their age was from 60 to 89 years old. 17 subjects were in the age group 60-75 years old and 4 subjects were more than 75 years old. 8 subjects lived alone and 13 subjects lived with their families. The participants in the study were from Cluj-Napoca, Sic, Sanraieni, Lueta, Timisoara, etc.

In Bulgaria, 16 women and 10 men were studied. Their age was from 64 to 92 years old. 17 subjects were in the age group 60-75 years old and 9 subjects were more than 75 years old. They all lived in one institution for elderly people in Sofia.

Instrument and Procedures

A questionnaire measuring sentimentality and nostalgia in elderly people was used (Gergov & Stoyanova, 2013). It measures past emotions continuing in the present, nostalgia of the past, and sentimental compensation. 12 items from this questionnaire were used to study elderly people in Romania and Bulgaria – in fact most of them were interviewed and a small part of them filled in the questionnaire. A small part of the studied elderly Roma people could cope with reading, comprehension and writing simultaneously. The answers were given in a 4-point Likert scale from disagree to strongly agree.

Data Analysis

The results were statistically processed by means of SPSS using descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis.

Results

The results from the items of the questionnaire measuring sentimentality and nostalgia among the minority elderly people studied in Bulgaria and Romania are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentages of Sentimental and Nostalgic Feelings Among Minority Elderly People's in Bulgaria and Romania

Item	Elderly Roma people in Bulgaria				Elderly Hungarians in Romania			
	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
The past is very important for me ^a	23.1	15.4	26.9	34.6	0.0	0.0	23.8	76.2
The past in a great degree determines my present and my future ^a	34.6	19.2	26.9	19.2	9.5	9.5	23.8	57.1
I often think about the past ^a	15.4	7.7	42.3	34.6	9.5	4.8	9.5	76.2
When I think about the past. I become full of positive emotions ^a	38.5	19.2	23.1	19.2	4.8	23.8	23.8	47.6
The emotions related to the past are a big deal of my present feelings	36.0	20.0	24.0	20.0	19.0	23.8	23.8	33.3
I think that the biggest part of the important events in my life have happened in the past	38.5	7.7	15.4	38.5	14.3	4.8	28.6	52.4
I am proud of my past ^a	38.5	7.7	23.1	30.8	4.8	0.0	19.0	76.2
I would live again my life in the same way	50.0	11.5	15.4	23.1	23.8	23.8	9.5	42.9
The past inspires me for the future ^a	50.0	19.2	15.4	15.4	9.5	14.3	28.6	47.6
In the past. I have remained unemotional even in situations where most people get very sentimental	61.5	15.4	11.5	11.5	66.7	19.0	0.0	14.3
I think that in a certain degree by means of good deeds now I could recompense my past negative acts	34.6	11.5	23.1	30.8	28.6	19.0	23.8	28.6
I am more sentimental than most people	38.5	3.8	19.2	38.5	9.5	9.5	14.3	66.7

^aThe answers of the minority elderly people in both countries differed significantly for this item.

The past was more important for the Hungarian minority in Romania than for the Roma minority in Bulgaria, $\chi^2(3) = 11.896$, $p = .008$, $\Phi = .503$. The past influenced more on the present and future for the Hungarian minority in Romania than for the Roma minority in Bulgaria, $\chi^2(3) = 8.52$, $p = .036$, $\Phi = .426$. More thoughts about the past reported the Hungarian minority in Romania than the Roma minority in Bulgaria, $\chi^2(3) = 8.758$, $p = .033$; $\Phi = .432$. The past was related to more positive emotions for the Hungarian minority in Romania than for the Roma minority in Bulgaria, $\chi^2(3) = 8.688$, $p = .034$, $\Phi = .43$. The studied participants from the Hungarian minority in

Romania were more proud of their past than the Roma minority in Bulgaria, $\chi^2(3) = 12.035$, $p = .007$, $\Phi = .506$. The participants from the Hungarian minority in Romania were more inspired by their past than the Roma minority in Bulgaria, $\chi^2(3) = 11.132$, $p = .011$, $\Phi = .487$.

There were also some age sub-groups significant differences in sentimentality and nostalgia – between young elders and oldest old minority subjects.

More thoughts about the past reported the minority young elders than the minority oldest old, $\chi^2(3) = 8.433$, $p = .038$, $\Phi = .424$; see [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of the Thoughts About the Past Among the Participants From Both Age Groups

Age group	I often think about the past								Total	
	disagree		uncertain		agree		strongly agree			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
60-75 years old	2	5.9%	2	5.9%	8	23.5%	22	64.7%	34	100.0%
> 75 years old	4	30.8%	1	7.7%	5	38.5%	3	23.1%	13	100.0%

The minority young elders felt more sentimental than the minority oldest old, $\chi^2(3) = 12.641$, $p = .005$, $\Phi = .519$; see [Table 3](#).

Table 3

Frequency Distribution of Feeling Sentimental Among the Participants From Both Age Groups

Age group	I am more sentimental than most people								Total	
	disagree		uncertain		agree		strongly agree			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
60-75 years old	4	11.8%	3	8.8%	7	20.6%	20	58.8%	34	100.0%
> 75 years old	8	61.5%	0	0.0%	1	7.7%	4	30.8%	13	100.0%

There were also some gender differences in sentimentality and nostalgia.

The females from the minority groups were more sentimental than the males from the minority groups, $\chi^2(3) = 9.144$, $p = .027$, $\Phi = .441$; see [Table 4](#).

Table 4

Frequency Distribution of Feeling Sentimental Among the Studied Male and Female Elderly Minority Participants in Both Countries

Gender	I am more sentimental than most people								Total	
	disagree		uncertain		agree		strongly agree			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Men	8	50.0%	0	0.0%	3	18.8%	5	31.2%	16	100.0%
Women	4	12.9%	3	9.7%	5	16.1%	19	61.3%	31	100.0%

Discussion

The Hungarian minority in Romania was more sentimental and nostalgic than the Roma minority in Bulgaria, as the results from the study indicated. The past was more important, influencing on the present and future, more often remembered in the thoughts, related to more positive emotions, giving inspiration and source of proud for the Hungarian minority in Romania than for the Roma minority in Bulgaria.

Higher sentimentality and nostalgia among Hungarians could be explained by some cross-cultural differences. One of these differences is expressed by the finding that elderly Hungarians are conservative in their preferences (Rekettye & Liu, 2001). Conservatism is immanent to nostalgia, according to a theoretical assumption - nostalgia is a feeling that turns to the past regarded uncritically or conservatively, and as disengaged from the present (Horn, 2009).

Higher nostalgia might be also related with the fact, that during the Second World War (1940-1944), according to the Second Vienna Award, Northern Transylvania was again part of Hungary (Macartney, 2014). Elderly Hungarians have (directly or indirectly) good thought about this period.

Another cross-cultural difference is related to the peculiarities of way of living of Roma people.

Roma people are often poor, with low levels of education, unskilled, with limited job opportunities (Milcher, 2006; Mizsei, 2006; Roma Education Fund, 2007), lacking hygiene and basic health care, dependent on social assistance, actively looking for benefits, limited contributing to social welfare, distrusting to the out-groups (Mizsei, 2006). Both Roma people and majority population living in close proximity to Roma people in Bulgaria and Romania in 2002 ranked "Lack of respect for old people" among the problems facing Roma people, but as a less serious problem than unemployment, economic hardship, discrimination (O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006, pp. 7-8).

The studied Roma people shared orally about a lot of difficulties in their life and their memories of the past were negative. They preferred to live in the present and not to think about the past, but they were optimistic about their future, in spite of having more difficult past.

These results about Roma people's positivism concerning the present and the future and not focusing on the negative past supported the findings from another study aiming to revealing prototype-variant relations for the concepts of black and white in 8 languages in several cultures. White was prototype (basis) and black was variant in American, Byelorussian, German, Romani and Russian cultures, while in Bulgarian and Kirghiz cultures prototype was black and variant was white. Night was prototype and day - variant in the Bulgarian culture, but in the Romani

culture the relation was reversed although both cultures had coexisted for hundreds of years (Gerganov & Kyuchukov, 2005).

Nostalgia is related to a crave for security, stability, authenticity. The anxiety for the future and implementing innovation is the reasons why people yearn for the past (Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012). Roma people living in institutions felt a sense of stability in their present and they shared some positive expectations for the future, that is why they less experienced nostalgia and sentimentality for the past.

More thoughts about the past reported the minority young elders than the minority oldest old, but the opposite trend was found in another study among the Bulgarian majority group of elderly people. Among Bulgarian majority elderly, the past emotions were more persistent in the present among the oldest old; the oldest old felt more nostalgia than the young elders; the oldest old strived more for sentimental compensation of some past negative acts than the young elders (Gergov & Stoyanova, 2013).

The minority young elders felt more sentimental than the minority oldest old, but the opposite trend was found in another study among the Bulgarian majority group of elderly people. Among Bulgarian majority elderly, the young elders were less sentimental than the oldest old (Gergov & Stoyanova, 2013).

There are some research findings that healthy elders between the ages of 65 and 90 are more risk-averse compared with younger people (Tymula, Rosenberg Belmaker, Ruderman, Glimcher, & Levy, 2013). Elderly people prefer the known daily routine and living with memories of their past that they often idealize and give as an example of the right way of doing things.

Concerning the limitations of the study, one of them was the small number of the samples of the minority groups in both countries, but they were almost equal in number for comparing them. The researchers had some difficulties in meeting these categories of respondents and convincing them to participate in the study.

Another limitation concerns the place of living of the both samples – alone or with their families in Romania, and in an institution in Bulgaria. The findings from another study indicated that there were not any statistically significant differences between the elderly people from the Bulgarian majority group living alone, with their families or in institutions in their Nostalgia and Sentimentality (Gergov & Stoyanova, 2013), so such a limitation as the different kinds of places of living could not be so important for the results in both countries.

One reason for choosing to study Roma people living in an institution was that Roma people often hide their identity during surveys (Mizsei, 2006), and Roma people in the institution declared their ethnic belonging.

Another limitation is related to the fewer number of males than females in both samples, but the findings from this study revealed the same tendency as in some other studies (Aluja, Blanch, Gallart, & Dolcet, 2010; Gergov & Stoyanova, 2013) that females were more sentimental than males. The females from the minority groups were more sentimental than the males from the minority groups, too.

Conclusions

The study of nostalgia and sentimentality has some practical implications for human behaviour in different social spheres.

The attitude towards the past determines the actual behaviour – whether one will withdraw and isolate himself/herself or s/he will look for some new possibilities for self-realization – work, hobby, etc. Nostalgia could be related to past behaviours and places.

Nostalgia could result in some behavioural acts aiming to make the past more close – for example tourism to some cultural heritage places is related to nostalgia (D’Arcens, 2011). Nostalgic associations facilitate information processing and it has been found that consumers prefer to buy the products of the brands with nostalgic associations (Cattaneo & Guerini, 2012). Nostalgia and sentimentality could also be related to some depressive symptoms in elderly people and feelings of loneliness.

The elderly people tend to feel worse psycho-somatically that strengthens the feeling of discomfort and the fear of future. The past is related to some positive memories about relatives, friends, professional success, important events, etc. The present life in the third age is deprived of some important events and people that provokes nostalgia and sentimental escape into the past.

The study of cross-cultural differences in sentimentality and nostalgia of ethnic minority people reveals that the past is not equally important for the different ethnic minority groups, so they use different adaptive strategies in the society. Demographic ageing is an important trend in contemporary societies, so the study of elderly people becomes more important for revealing some trend in development of societies.

The problem of elderly people’s nostalgia in the Balkan countries is a very interesting and important issue. Any future work in this direction would be valuable for better understanding of elderly people’s problems and improving their living conditions.

Competing Interests

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