
MASS MEDIA'S ROLE IN COPING MOVING INTO A RETIREMENT HOME

ABSTRACT Postmodern society is labeled as fading out traditional role models and increased geographical dispersed living. Therefore, senior citizens are confronted with a rather dramatic change: moving from their own apartment into a retirement home. This change is associated with an experienced decrease of healthiness and a loss of social and financial capabilities. In this situation the media might be potential catalyzers for social capital. They provide information on the world affairs, strengthen the residents' social identities and provide a low cost joint action. We investigated with a survey among 195 senior citizens living in German retirement homes whether media use influences subjective well-being and changes when retirement home residents have coped their moving into their new home. The results indicate that the power of the media as socialization instance lies within their lifelong socialization rather than in their short term assistance in coping with social change.

KEYWORDS

mass media, media use, socialization, elderly

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1. INTRODUCTION

The tradition of providing care for elderly diminished somewhat in much of Western societies during the second half of the 20th century. While families increasingly live geographically dispersed and traditional role models fade out (Knox & Pinch, 2010, pp252; Del Casino Jr. 2009, pp183), institutional settings (referred to as retirement homes in the following) such as assisted living facilities and nursing homes become more available and gain increasing importance (Miller, Shoemaker, Willyard & Addison, 2008). Moving into a retirement home might be a rather dramatic change for senior citizens: It means, more or less, breaking with established routines, “which has a much greater potential for affecting self-concept and self-esteem compared to physical changes that allow continuity at a reduced activity level” (Atchley, 1999, p.83; Gubrium, 1973). Furthermore, moving into a retirement home might go along with a disconnection with one’s firm social network. Therefore, senior citizens have to consolidate their social network after moving into their new home. This is an important step as research has identified a close social network as a significant factor of later life happiness (Arling, 1976; Collins, Sarkasian & Winner, 2009; Isaacowitz & Smith, 2003; Nussbaum, 1983; Dolan, Peasgood & White, 2008; Ryff, 1995). Additionally, the integration into the caretaking facility, its processes and social life is a challenging task to cope with.

The same applies to coping physical declines and changes in the parent-child relationship (Fowler & Fisher, 2009; Gill & Morgan, 2011).

Fortunately, senior citizens generally master these challenges well as research finds little evidence to support a link between aging and diminished happiness (Blazer, 2003; Baltes & Mayer, 1999; Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr & Nesselroade, 2000; Gill & Morgan, 2011; Ryff, 1995). Instead, subjective well-being increases with age after midlife (Diener & Suh 1997; Easterlin, 2006; Ferrer-i-Carbonell & Gowdy, 2007; Fredrickson, 2001; Pressman & Cohen, 2005; Ryff, 1995). This finding also holds true for retirement home residents (Downs, Javidi & Nussbaum, 1988).

Although numerous studies have shown the importance of warm, trusting and supportive interpersonal relationships for mastering social changes (Argyle, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2001), little evidence exists regarding the role of mass media as agent of socialization in this stage of life. This seems surprising for two reasons: Mass media are accounted to be an important socialization instance especially regarding the social capital (Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009). Furthermore, mass media use is an important everyday activity of most senior citizens particularly in order to coping loneliness (Davis & Westbrook, 1985; Doolittle, 1979; Laukka, 2007; Scherer, Schneider & Gonser, 2006; Unternährer & Schönhagen, 2011; Young, 1979; Zoch, 2009). Mass media support maintaining the relationships regarding the existing social network of friends and family as well as bonding to new acquaintances within

the retirement home (Zoch, 2009; Thieme, 2008). Hence, we suggest the existence of three main functions with which mass media assist retirement home residents' adjustment of social capital: media use as a function of information about others and as a basis for reference group communication, media use as a function of understanding others and identifying with them, and joint media use.

Regarding the first function, senior citizens are assumed to use mass media as information source to keep up with the world affairs. In order to do this, mass media supply the content for conversations of senior citizens with family members, friends and peer retirement home residents (Atkin, 1972; Eveland, 2004; Fallis, Fitzpatrick & Friestad, 1985; Thieme, 2008).

Mass media fulfill the function of understanding others and identifying with them in both serving as low cost joint activity with peer residents and information base about the beliefs and expectations of the world outside the retirement home. This helps senior citizens to strengthen their social identity with other residents, friends and family (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2001) and to synchronize their behavior with the institutionalized settings of the retirement home community (Clark, 1996; Gill & Morgan, 2011; Kaplan & Miller, 1987). Finally, it is suggested that joint media use serves as a substitute joint activity in those cases retirement home residents cannot afford other joint activities with their reference groups due to a lack of social, financial or health resources.

In summary, the study on hand questions whether senior citizens living in retirement homes use these functions of mass media to cope moving into their new home. Therefore, we conclude that the suggested functions of media use should a) predict subjective well-being and b) should change when retirement home residents have coped their moving into their new home.

2. METHOD

2.1. SAMPLE & PROCEDURE

We addressed 159 retirement homes in the county of Hanover City, Germany, to support a paper-pencil survey among their inhabitants. This was granted by 23 of them. We conducted the survey in March 2011 among 218 senior citizens in scheduled meetings with each of the 23 communities. Although designed as a paper-pencil questionnaire we assisted the senior citizens with field interviewers to ensure comprehensibility. This was the case in one third of the interviews. Nevertheless, we find no significant differences according to the specific situation of data collection, except on the residents' media use. We suppose that this effect is rather due to the residents' state of health than due to the mode of data collection.

Those residents missing more than 15 questions were dropped from analysis. The effective sample consisted of 195 retirement home resi-

dents with an average age of 80.39 years. Most of them live in nursing homes (61 %) and receive comprehensive everyday assistance. The other respondents live in senior housing projects (28 %), assisted living communities (9 %) and senior citizen apartments (3 %) which provide a less institutionalized caretaking. The average residence time is 4.23 years whereas more than half of the interviewed residents (57 %) live in the retirement home for less than three years. Nearly three-fourths are female (73 %). In terms of education, 29 % completed secondary school, a quarter gained professional education and training (24 %) and 38 % hold a higher educational degree than the afore-mentioned. The overrepresentation of higher educated senior citizens in the sample presumably is due to the better health conditions and higher income compared to the average of the cohort. Therefore those senior citizens are both more able to afford living in a retirement home as well as capable of taking part in the survey.

2.2 MEASURES

Subjective well-being. One Likert-type item was designed to measure the perceived overall satisfaction of the residents with their life situation: "All in all, I am satisfied with my life situation". Response categories varied between *strongly disagree* (coded with 0) to *strongly agree* (coded with 4).

Functioning of media use to adjust social capital. Three main functions of media use helping senior citizens to adjust their social capital were

measured: media use to inform about others to participate in reference group communication, media use as a function of understanding others and identifying with them, and joint media use. In terms of the information function, subjects were asked to respond to the following two statements: a) "I use mass media – like TV or radio – to keep up to the world affairs my friends and acquaintances outside the retirement home talk about", b) "I use mass media – like TV or radio – to keep up to the world affairs my fellow resident friends and acquaintances talk about". Regarding the orientation function subjects responded to the items a) "I use some media just because it pleases my family/my friends/fellow residents", b) "In some cases, I use mass media only because I can speak about it later with my family/my friends/fellow residents", c) "I am glad when my family/my friends/fellow residents recommend worthwhile television broadcasts, books or magazine articles". The items were again Likert-type survey items with answer categories varying from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Finally, joint media use was measured as a single item: "What media do you preferably use in situations of joint media use with your family/your friends/fellow residents?" Respondents were asked to indicate for each reference group (family, friends and acquaintances outside the retirement home, and fellow resident friends and acquaintances) which medium (newspaper, magazines, radio and TV broadcast) they use collectively.

Perceived coping of moving into a retirement home. In order to assess respondents coping

with moving into a retirement home they were asked if they already feel at home or if they do not feel at home or are still settling in.

Perceived social capital. In terms of social capital we addressed the respondents to give information about perceived satisfaction with three forms of social capital: their financial resources (“I can afford things I want to buy”), their social resources (“I cannot complain about the size of my circle of friends and acquaintances”, “In case I have a problem, I easily find someone among my friends or acquaintances for assistance”) and their state of health (“I am not able to follow all of my interests due to health state limitations”). Furthermore, we asked respondents about their sight and hearing ability (“I cannot use the media I want to, due to limited sight”, “I cannot use the media I want to, due to limited hearing ability”). The answer categories for the afore-mentioned items varied between *strongly disagree* (coded 0) to *strongly agree* (coded 4).

Demographics and duration of stay. We included age, sex, and educational level in our analysis. Furthermore, we asked the residents since how many years and months they live in the retirement home.

Living situation and retirement home characteristics. Five items measured the subjects' living situation. Respondents were asked whether they are “single and live alone in the retirement home” or are “in a relationship living together in the retirement home”. Furthermore, we asked the subjects whether they share their room with another resident, use the retirement home's communal

rooms for joint activities, use communal PC or internet access, and participate in the retirement home's program of daily activities.

3. RESULTS

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted predicting subjective well-being of retirement home residents from demographics, duration of stay, living situation and retirement home characteristics, social capital, and functions of media use for adjustment of social capital. The model explains 13.6 % of the variance in subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is positively associated with the residents' age, their duration of stay, and the available social resources. Contrary to the assumption media use is not associated with subjective well-being. The detailed estimates are presented in table 1.

The null-finding regarding media use might be due to a possible moderating effect of social capital. Therefore, we conducted a regression analysis predicting social capital from the several functions of media use. Contrary to the expectations, no influence is detected ($F(8/103)=1.659$ $p=.119$; $R^2=.123$).

Furthermore, we tested whether media use fulfills different functions when respondents have coped moving into the retirement home. Table 2 presents the detailed results of the conducted analyses of variance with covariates (ANCOVA). We find significant differences in media use between the two resident groups in three of the re-

Table 1: Hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting subjective well-being of retirement home residents from demographics, duration of stay, living situation and retirement home characteristics, social capital, and functions of media use for adjustment of social capital.

Predictor	Influence on subjective well-being	
	ΔR^2	β
Step 1: Demographics	.04	
Age (n=187)	.159**	
Education (n=185)		n.s.
Gender (n=193)		n.s.
Step 2: Living situation	.043	
single stay/stay with partner (n=193)		n.s.
Single room resident (n=183)		n.s.
Using communal rooms (n=186)		n.s.
Using communal PC/internet access (n=180)		n.s.
Daily activity program participation (n=186)		n.s.
Duration of stay in months (n=181)		.180**
Step 3: Social capital	.079	
Social resources (n=184)		.283**
Financial resources (n=181)		n.s.
Health resources (n=189)		n.s.
Step 4: Functions of media use	-	
Information about others/reference group communication (n=185)		n.s.
Understanding others/social identity (n=134)		n.s.
Joint media use (n=195)		n.s.
Total R ² (korr. R ²)	.161 (.136)	
N	195	

All tolerance values above .95
 * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .0001

garded dependent measures: Those senior citizens that feel at home in the retirement home use mass media content more often as a basis for conversation with friends and acquaintances from outside the retirement home (MW=2.3) than those not feeling at home or still settling in (MW=1.5;

F(1/126)=4.008; p=.047; part. η^2 =.031). Residents still settling in use mass media more often in terms of social identification with fellow resident friends (MW=1.6) compared to those feeling like home (MW=1.5; F(1/84)=1.352; p=.047; part. η^2 =.016). Finally, one fifth (19 %) of those not

feeling at home or still settling in the retirement home use media in co-audience with external friends and acquaintances. In contrast 35 % of those feeling like home do so ($F(1/131)=6.355$; $p=.013$; part. $\eta^2=.046$).

Table 2: Functions of media use by perceived coping of moving into a retirement home

	perceived coping of moving into a retirement home			
	Still settling in/Do not feel at home ¹		Feel at home	
	M	n	M	n
Information about others/reference group conversation regarding				
Friends and acquaintances outside the retirement home ²	1.5	56	2.3	81
Fellow resident friends and acquaintances ³	1.4*	58	1.9*	80
Understanding of .../social identification with ...				
Family members ⁴	1.5	45	1.8	66
Outside friends & acquaintances ⁵	1.6	35	2.0	67
Fellow resident friends & acquaintances ⁶	1.6*	35	1.5*	60
Joint media use with ...				
Family members ⁷	.44	59	.41	83
Outside friends & acquaintances ⁸	.19*	59	.35*	83
Fellow resident friends & acquaintances ⁹	.44	59	.39	83

N=142

ANCOVA including age, gender, education, financial resources, health resources, limitation in sight and hearing, and living situation as covariates

* $p < .05$

1: the sub-categories "I feel not at all at home in this place" and "I am still settling in but I start to feel myself comfortable living here" were subsumed due to their number of cases.

2: $F(1/126)=4.008$; $p=.047$; part. $\eta^2=.031$

3: $F(1/127)=.811$; $p=.369$; part. $\eta^2=.006$

4: $F(1/100)=.121$; $p=.729$; part. $\eta^2=.001$

5: $F(1/91)=.534$; $p=.467$; part. $\eta^2=.006$

6: $F(1/84)=1.352$; $p=.047$; part. $\eta^2=.016$

7: $F(1/131)=.006$; $p=.939$; part. $\eta^2=.000$

8: $F(1/131)=6.355$; $p=.013$; part. $\eta^2=.046$

9: $F(1/131)=.096$; $p=.758$; part. $\eta^2=.001$

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined whether media use influences subjective well-being and changes when retirement home residents have coped their moving into their new home. We suggested moving into a retirement home to be a challenging developmental task for senior citizens and that elderly solve this task by relying on their social network. We referred to mass media as being a further powerful instance in the process of socialization, especially with regards to the management of social capital (Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009). It was supposed that mass media help senior citizens to adjust their social capital: Mass media a) inform retirement home residents about others and therefore facilitate the communication with their reference groups, b) help to understand others and therefore foster processes of social identification, and c) are a low cost joint activity.

Our study supports previous findings (e.g. Gonsler, 2010) which identified mass media use to be a significant leisure time activity of senior citizens. However, neither the duration of stay in the retirement home nor reference group conversation influence the use of residents' mass media use. We found no evidence for the described role of mass media in the life of senior citizens moving into a retirement home. In contrast to our assumptions, subjective well-being of retirement home residents is neither directly nor indirectly associated with the suggested functions of media use.

Despite this null-finding, we found partial support for the assumed change of mass media functions when retirement home residents finished the developmental task of coping moving into their new home. Comparing those residents feeling at home and those, who do not, the first mentioned group uses mass media content more often as a basis for the conversations with friends and acquaintances outside the retirement home and shows a higher joint media use with external friends and acquaintances. Residents who do not feel at home or still settle in have a higher need for social identification with fellow resident friends and acquaintances.

Considered as a whole, our findings are particularly surprising. The vast majority of socialization research emphasizes both socialization as a lifelong process and the media as one of its powerful agents catalyzing solutions for developmental tasks. Although gerontological literature suggest moving into a retirement home to be a serious developmental challenge in elderly adults' life, our findings seem to indicate a passive role of mass media in this process. Mass media appear rather to preserve a long-term stability than to moderate short-term changes. The empirical comparison of the joint media use of those residents already settled with those who have not provides some indication for this assumption. First, the joint media use with family members does not differ in terms of coping status. About 40 % in both groups jointly use mass media with family members. This might indicate the ritual media use which provides stability in changing environments and symbolizes

cohesion with family (Durkheim, 1915; Rothenbuhler, 1998). Furthermore, the indifference between the groups regarding joint media use with fellow residents might be due to an analogous reason. Media use is synchronized with the institutional setting as well as it is sparsely avoidable when sharing a room with another resident, what 33 % of the respondents do. Finally, senior citizens feeling at home in their new resident show higher joint media use with external friends and acquaintances than those who still settle in or do not feel at home. Media use probably does not indicate the successful coping of the moving situation, but indicates when things are “normal” again. Regarding the joint media use with friends and acquaintances outside the retirement home, it is arguable that external friends and acquaintances are coping with the situation as do their peers. Therefore, visits of acquaintances to their friend’s new home might be events by themselves leading both groups to discover and discuss the new situation. Senior citizens might wish to offer a more special joint activity than the simply using mass media collectively. Over the years, the retirement home loses its “curiosity”, the amount of changes in the personal life circumstances to talk about decreases as well as the residents’ health status, and joint media use becomes an option of sharing time again.

In contrast to the aforementioned, the social identification with fellow resident friends and acquaintances is the only result indicating a short-term socialization process induced by senior citizens’ mass media use. However, the effect

strength is rather limited as we found no influence of this mass media’s function to serve social identification on the perceived social capital. Instead, senior citizens seem to rather rely on their established social network than on mass media use managing their relationships.

Besides the given explanation, we suggest that in the study on hand the effectiveness of mass media as socialization instance might be limited due to our sample choice. It is possible that our study focuses only on those residents who prefer different coping strategies above media use due to available resources. As afore-mentioned our sample is biased towards people with higher educational level. In addition to that, living in a retirement home affords substantial financial resources and it seems arguable that preferably residents in rather better health condition participated in the survey. Therefore, our study might address a biased sample. It is at least questionable if we can generalize our findings to senior citizens with fewer resources. Media use might be the social agent of choice among those elderly with less social, financial, and health capital due to its low cost and low claim for physical conditions. This sample limitation should be considered in further research. Including senior citizens from different socio-economic groups of the population might help to identify those social, financial and health circumstances that catalyze the use of media as socialization instance for the elderly.

In sum, the value of our study lies in the generalization of its conclusions rather than in the generalization of its findings. While literature on ge-

rontology and socialization research suggested how senior citizens should behave coping resettlement, the results of our study show that at least the surveyed retirement home residents differ

from these suggestions. Therefore, this study highlights the necessity to further examine the role of mass media as agent of socialization in later adulthood.

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