

The Fascination of Love Never Fades – How Do the Elderly describe Their Experiences of Falling in Love?

Kaarina Määttä

Faculty of Education, University of Lapland
P. O. Box 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland
e-mail: Kaarina.Maatta@ulapland.fi

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Abstract

Love in old age causes prejudices and paradoxical feelings even though emotions and the ability to love do not disappear along aging. The research on love has concentrated on adolescence; and thus, senior citizens' love has remained in the shadow. The aim of this article is to describe how the old people (aged between 50 and 91) describe their experiences of falling in love. What kind of feelings and thoughts does falling in love arouse among them and how does it reflect in their behavior? The data was collected through informal letters (N= 117) where the elderly revealed their thoughts and experiences in an open manner. The data was analyzed by content analysis. The seniors' stories show how significant love and intimacy are for their self-esteem. The fact that one is accepted and loved without conditions as oneself is of unquestionable value especially along aging. Two equals to more, even in old age. Intimate relationships, family, and love predict successful aging.

Keywords: falling in love, love, the elderly, senior, old people, aging.

1. Introduction

The elderly study, nurture, travel, spend, play golf, go out, fall in love, and love. Magazine headings about virtual grandfathers and remarried grandmothers and the beatific facial pictures of the elderly fallen in love make even many young readers stop and wonder about grandmothers' or grandfathers' pace of life. If the image of a gray-haired senior sitting on a rocking chair and knitting a sock has, indeed, extended, seniors' strength for life is still doubted and wondered in public (Brubaker & Powers, 1976).

Aging is fundamentally social: the society defines who and at what age people are considered as senior citizens, aged, or old (Bevan, 2001). On the other hand, people create their self-image according to the one that others' have about them. The elderly notice that they are old based on other people's words, suggestions, and behavior without having experienced any major personal changes. In the heart, a senior can refuse to accept the tag given him/her of his/her aging (Thompson, 1992).

Children and youngsters believe that the elderly are another human species because they have seen the old people they know only as old (Brubacher & Powers, 1976; Lane, 1964). In addition, there are plenty of old people who consider other seniors as another species (Rothermund & Branstädter, 2003; Ron 2007; Sherrard, 2008).

Conceptions of the elderly are contradictory. The beliefs about the characteristics of the elderly are mixed with the assumptions on what kind of people they are wished to be or what kind of people they are feared to become. On the other hand, we emphasize that the old people's life experiences are valuable and useful to be shared with others as lessons (Ikels et al., 1992).

As the life expectancy and health standards improve many seniors have opportunities to create new relationships. They make friends, fall in love, get married, and divorce like younger people do (Katz, 2000; Magai *et al.*, 2009; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Love does not look at the age nor count wrinkles. Emotions and the ability to love do not disappear along aging (Bergmann, 1988). Although the outer presence alters along with aging emotional life remains powerful and perception keeps sensitive (Schultz, 1982). The feeling of being loved and an opportunity to show love are as valuable to the elderly as they are for the young (Berscheid & Reis, 1998).

Because the research on seniors' love has been minimal, I report in this article my research where 117 Finnish seniors aged between 50 and 92 told their love stories. Even the oldest of them illustrated the power of the emotional charge: "how strongly Amor's arrow can touch one".

The aim of this article is to describe what love really means and what it evokes in the thoughts, souls, and hearts of the Finnish elderly. I dedicate this article to the reality they have experienced – and which has been distorted by many myths and clichés.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Definitions of the Nature of Falling in Love

The phenomenon of falling in love has got numerous different definitions. Alberoni (1979) describes falling in love as assimilation; Tennov (1979) refers to limerence; Girard (1972) talks about losing oneself; Askew (1965) refers to neurosis; Kilpatrick (1974) to anti-social behavior; and Stendahl (in 1830/1957) to crystallizing. On the contrary, love can be understood as a divine phenomenon, a manifestation of immortality among mortal people, and a way and accession to holiness (Irigaray, 1982). Erich Fromm (1956) considers love as an active power that connects people with each other. It makes isolation and loneliness to disappear providing the feeling of unity and security. The "we"-experience that two people in love share can be quite world-shaking by its depth: Francesco Alberoni (1979) felicitously regards falling in love as the derivation of two-people mass movement.

Falling in love consists of several phases (Coleman, 1977; Hatfield, 1988; Hegi & Begner, 2010; Kernberg, 1977; Määttä, 2010; Sternberg, 1998), and the power of falling in love as an emotional experience has been studied comprehensively (Alberoni, 1979; Fenchel, 2005; Pines, 1999; Riela *et al.*, 2010). Falling in love can be magic of joy and happiness, excitement and pleasure, corroded by insecurity and the fear of losing love (Määttä, 2005, 2006; Pines, 1999). There are more and more studies about the crises and pitfalls that come along with the process of falling in love (Bergman, 1995; Gordon, 2008).

Falling in love is really "a many-splendored thing" as was the name of Han Suyi's novel from 1952. Regardless of various theories, the event of falling in love however is one-of-a-kind for everyone. Regardless of age, everyone loves by their own way and the experience of falling in love is individual, unique, and subjective (Dion & Dion, 1973; Hegi & Bergner, 2010; Määttä, 2005, 2006; Sternberg, 1998).

2.2 The Ability to Love is not Age-Bound

Although the physical presence of the elderly has altered along aging, their emotional life is still strong and their perception is sensitive (Schulz, 1982). Emotions or social and mental abilities are not age-bound nor does the ability to love disappear along aging (Bergman, 1988).

Love and falling in love in adolescence have been studied relatively much (see e.g. Collins, 2003; Connolly *et al.*, 2004; Määttä, 2010) although the sufficiency of even this research has been questioned (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999). Senior citizens' love has remained in the shadow and their love is considered with prejudices and paradoxical feelings (Gekoski & Know, 1990; Rothermund & Brandstädter, 2003). The life of the elderly, at its best, is seen as peaceful and filled with love. Certainly, they are considered as entitled to love and even hoped to have love; however, some conditions are placed on how they can live it out appropriately (Watson, Bell, & Stelle, 2010). The limitations and conditions for younger people's love are loosened whereas the attitudes and

prejudices towards seniors' emotional life can be even surprisingly rigid (Pecchioni & Croghan, 2002).

Neither do basic needs disappear along aging although the ways of satisfying them might be different than when one was younger. The need of becoming accepted, to love and be loved are unquestionable for people regardless of age, health, or gender. The feeling of being loved and the opportunity to show love are equally important to the elderly and younger people (Berscheid & Reis, 1998).

Human relationships and interaction with others are important in every phase and situation of life (Reis & Rusbult, 2004). The value of intimate people as the providers of social support is irreplaceable. Many find it of primary value to get support when the situation requires it. When the biological and physical functions become weaker, people have the increasing need to be appreciated as well as to experience affection and love.

Among the elderly, the human relationship network that covers children, grandchildren, siblings, and other family members is considered as natural and valuable. They provide the elderly with content and support. Nevertheless, people do not lose their gender along aging and the interest towards the opposite sex is natural (Lang & Fingerman, 2004).

Even today, dating among the elderly involves various myths. The elderly might be associated with an impression implying that their emotional life would have died and romance or sexual needs would not belong to them. Furthermore, these needs have been regarded as inappropriate or deviant. Interest towards the opposite sex might make one feel embarrassed or guilty. The outsiders' disapproval or one's own confusion may also cause emotional denial.

Nowadays, it is common that the retired also start new intimate relationships. People are not meant to survive and cope alone—not even when old. The elderly are not genderless but men and women who still have an interest towards the opposite sex.

This article leans on the humanistic idea of man emphasizing that old age is natural and good; a phase of life that offers opportunities for self-fulfillment. Based on this idea, the elderly are autonomous, unique individuals. The older people are, the more they differ from each other as individuals. People's various experiences along their long life span affect their personality and they develop their specific characteristics and ways of expressing themselves (Rentsch, 1977). However, aging does not change personality to the same degree as it changes biological and physical traits. Despite their age, most people consider themselves similar to when they were younger (Thompson, 1992).

3. The Aim of This Research

I started a research project in Finland which aimed at analyzing the content and meaning of love scheme in people's life span and identity formation. This research was divided into several separate parts. The purpose of this article is to dissect the experience of falling in love and to illustrate the phases and progress of the process of falling in love through the seniors' descriptions (Määttä, 2005). Based on the results, my purpose is to support the positive dimension of old age: it can be the time of opportunities that involve enjoying life. Old age is an emotionally important phase in people's life span.

This article aims at describing, classifying, and analyzing how the elderly experience falling in love after meeting their partners or significant others. What happens when the elderly fall in love? What kind of feelings and thoughts falling in love arouses among them and how does it reflect in their behavior? What kind of changes does falling in love cause in them? What phases can be found in falling in love among the elderly? What kind of differences can be found between different people during the process of falling in love? These questions can be crystallized into the form of the following research question:

How do the elderly describe their experiences of falling in love?

How does falling in love in old age differ from the experience of falling in love in the youth according to the elderly?

4. Materials and Methods

I asked the Finnish elderly to write me their own love story. I transmitted this wish via periodicals when I was interviewed about my opinions on love because of my status as “the Love Professor” in Finland. I composed an instructional leaflet to help the writing about love experiences with the heading “*I would give my all to you; I would carry you on my arms*”. I posed some specifying questions that would guide their answers but I emphasized that the most important thing is to describe their own love story through those experiences that they find important to themselves.

I decided to collect the data in the form of informal letters because I believe that with those letters people can reveal what they really think and feel. Through the letters, the many forms and shades of seniors’ love would be revealed in the best way. I wanted to give participants the chance to deliberate and outline their answers freely in peace. Therefore, these letters were written in people’s everyday life without the researcher’s intervention. The writers have defined what to include in their stories and what is left untold.

Some of the participants told about their new love in old age whereas for others falling in love was a new experience taking place not until in old age. What the stories had in common was their vivid and rich narration about the experiences of falling in love. In addition, the participants could self determine the answers to the questions about who are senior citizens or when senior age begins. The writers were aged between 50 and 91 and their average age was 70 years. Age could not be defined distinctively from all stories.

I received altogether 117 letters or love stories. 72 of the writers were women and 38 of them were men. There were seven stories that were signed together. The lengths of the letters varied between a few sheets and over one hundred pages of detailed biographies. I was powerfully riveted by the flow of someone’s narratives whereas, at times, I was touched by some others’ simplified expression. Most of the writers describe the joy and happiness of their falling in love but among the responses there were some rough stories of disappointments as well.

Although the writers could have sent the letters anonymously, many of them gave their contact information and expressed their willingness of giving supplementary information if necessary. In this article, all are treated anonymously. Instead, the writers are referred here with actual ages but fictitious names that reveal, however, their gender.

As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, qualitative data comes in the form of words rather than in numbers. The issue, then, is how I moved from these words to data analysis. Moving from coding to interpretation is a crucial phase (Coffey, & Atkinson, 1996; Silverman, 2005). Interpretation involves transcending factual data and analyzing cautiously what is at the core of it.

I have read the letters several times. Based on them, I have pursued creating an overall description of the emotional experience of falling in love. I have proceeded in three steps with content analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawings (see Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the “raw” data (Silverman, 2005). Data reduction involves making decisions about what data chunks or themes will provide the initial focus. Data display is “*an organized assembly of information that permits conclusion drawings*” (Silverman, 2005, p. 178) through which I was able to specify the answers to my research questions. The aim was to create the categories that describe the seniors’ experiences of love. In order to be able to show the contents in practice, I have added plenty of quotations from the respondents’ letters within this article. In addition, the quotations function as the proofs for reliability. At the end, I perform the conclusion drawings, which means “*beginning to decide what things mean, noting regularities, patterns, explanations, causal flows, and proportions*” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 22).

Certainly the generalizability, validity, and reliability of the results can be criticized. How filtered the stories in these letters were? They are summaries of the course of events constructed by the writers afterwards. In that form, the letters describe every writer’s way of assessing their own life, the chains of events and emotions that mold it. At the end, it is not salient whether the writers describe the happenings comprehensively or truthfully but their interpretation of what actually happened.

The motives for writing the letters were diverse. Many wanted to share their experience of a successful relationship although they did not hide the problems either. Despite of problems, the attitude towards life was bright among many of the participants: “*I thank my spouse for every day*”

(Robin, aged 82). Some wanted to clarify their life situation by writing and thus, writing functioned as a way to understand one's self. *"Through writing, I see myself with the new eyes and sometimes wonder the opening views. Maybe, this all will guide others as well"* (Carol, aged 74). Many had experienced the therapeutic nature of writing. Some found writing delightful; however sometimes, it opened someone's old wounds. Some were surprised of the strength of their own feelings and wanted to transmit their experiences to others: *"I decided to write because I have had emotional experiences that I thought would belong only to the time of adolescence"* (John, aged over 50, recently fallen in love).

The letters I received represented filtered narrations to some extent. One can paper over the events, highlight one's own experiences, or protect the close ones. Memories or stories are always summaries of the courses of events reconstructed afterwards by the tellers. Nor is one able to write everything one has experienced. Memory is also selective: sometimes memories grow sweeter with time; some other time reality appears rougher than it actually was.

It is hard to estimate to what extent the picture in these stories is exaggerated or prettified. However, the letters give the idea that the writers wanted to give about of their life. Writing about life well or in a right way is as difficult as living such a life. What people define as their experience is especially important. It has its own significance as such; and indeed, the impression that a writer has got about the events directs in many ways his/her overall behavior in everyday life. Not only those days that are gone constitute life but also those that we remember.

5. Results

5.1 Where Does Love Begin?

It is impossible to answer the question who will fall in love and who will be shot by Amor's arrow during their old age. The roads to love are filled with the licks of the draw and one cannot know even in old age where one finds love (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2009). The experiences of falling in love vary as remarkably among the elderly as among younger people: *"The age and place do not matter; love ignites when it ignites"* (Robert, aged 68) or *"Love comes when it comes and I was endowed with it"* (Susan, aged 70).

Some have passed a difficult marriage that ended in divorce, some were widows: *"The decease of the life companion hurts so deeply that only one can understand it; the one who have travelled the same road, loved me when I have least deserved it, but when I needed it the most"* (Mary, aged 80). In addition, there are those seniors who have proceeded slowly in building their human relationships and have fallen in love in their old age for the first time: *"A person who now almost shares the same skin with me stepped in front of me"* (Rebecca, aged 69).

Many wanted to prove with their stories how the emotions touch strongly even in old age. *"In this age and after everything I have gone through, I now feel like the whole new space would have opened for me"* (Roy, aged 68).

Even the elderly talk about love at first sight. The experience of falling in love can also be emotionally powerful in old age (see Oishi, Diener & Lucas, 2007) and the elderly describe *"how they become fascinated and charmed even when old"* (Rosemary, aged 85) or *"how it makes your head in a whirl and mixes up your intestines"* (David, aged 71).

Still, the experience of falling in love involves plenty of suspiciousness: age also arouses fear, insecurity, and helplessness when building a relationship (see Murray et al., 2001). Could I, still in this age? On the other hand, *"we have, in our life, made so many big decisions that involved risk. If one wants to achieve something great, one has to take a chance"* (Peter, aged 67, a widow, fallen in love recently).

5.2 What Happens When One Falls in Love?

5.2.1 One's health improves

Many seniors described that the life of one in love appears in the new light, downright smiles (see Benyamini, et al. 2000; Carr, 2007). People enjoy the small things, are happier and more energetic. As if one walked on the air and one's mind was reborn. Some tell about the improved health condition and the decrease in their consumption of medicines. "I felt somehow lighter" (Florence, aged 64), "I did not even notice all my aches" (Janet, aged 74), and "She is the light of my life" (Keith, aged 67).

5.2.2 Love makes one feel younger

Falling in love makes the elderly act like children, in a childish and foolish way. Lovebirds can laugh and notice new reasons for laugh in their everyday life. "I do nothing but laugh with him." (Valerian, aged 60). "I, a grouch, straight-faced man, find myself laughing aloud. The dark matters are often put aside nowadays." (Graham, aged 76)

The elderly in love starts paying more attention to their appearance as well: "You have to make up and preen yourself just like you did when you were a filly." (Florence, aged 64) On the other hand, bearing one's own years becomes easier with the other who understands aging as well: "I find it easy to be old with her. Hang the wrinkles and cataract; we can still use both brain halves for the joy of both of us". (Keith, aged 67, fallen in love after divorcing)

The way one sees the loved one may be the same one did when young. One sees the loved one as beautiful or handsome: "Every now and then, I see in her eyes the look of her 18-year-old attractive soul. Sometimes lived years disappear: we are young again." (Jeffrey)

On the other hand, many seniors become younger instantly in their memories when they summon up their experiences (see Zender & Olshanky, 2009). Adolescence lived long ago is a part of a human being and the prevailing moment; and many seniors can, from time to time, be younger than the young ever could: "When I look back my life, I would be ready to start everything all over again with the same promises and, most of all, with the same girl", assures Robin (aged 82, been married for 59 years).

5.2.3 Caring makes one stronger

The elderly seem to have the sixth sense which they use for sensing what their partner needs (see White & Dolan, 2009). And that exactly they are ready to offer whether it is comfort or support, a companion for jogs or cottage trips (see Krause, 2011). All the mentioned strengthens intimacy and affinity. "Bugger the age. When being together is nice, ailments are forgotten. You have something else in your mind than illnesses when you have a good partner". (Pat, aged 86) Caring can be quite practical as well: "If one loses his memory, the other might remember better" (Letty, aged 81).

5.2.4 It is hard to believe that love is true

Lovers do not seem to believe that what has happened to them is true. They have to be assured by touching that the other is really near and that everything is true. The language of touch seems to be equally important for seniors as it is for children at the beginning of life. "How can this surprising glory of finding each other be possible? I had to twiddle with my skin and do many other tests in order to make sure that I am alive." (Louise, aged 58)

5.2.5 Sexuality does not disappear

For some, the positive experiences in the field of sexuality open a totally new channel to their self (see DeLamater & Moorman, 2007). Someone does not learn to enjoy sex until old age or “is able to brighten up the faded colors of sexuality” (Rebecca, aged 69). They are able to appreciate the ability to fall in love and to love in this sense as well.

On the other hand, many of the elderly emphasized the multiformity of the manifestation of sexuality. They did not want to restrict sexuality within sexual activity but within the feelings of loving and becoming loved, admired, and appreciated. Sexuality means joy, pleasure, voluptuousness, intimacy, and attraction. Eroticism may manifest itself in a warm smile and glow in the eyes, a tender hug, caressing other’s chin and stroking his/her head, a warm hand shake and approval. “Although sex has become less important along aging, each other’s proximity is wonderful now.” (William, aged 74)

5.3 The Prejudices of the Environment

Not all look kindly upon entering into a new relationship when old. Other people do not necessarily consider falling in love as appropriate for the elderly. The attitudes and slant can be surprisingly prejudiced. Some stated that they are a reproach to their relatives and laughing stocks for strangers. “I was stamped as a woman of ill repute when I started spending more and more time at this man’s place” (Susie, aged 73, a widow, recently fallen in love)

Many tend to hide their relationship in order to avoid gossiping. Many elderly were pondering how to phrase the matter: “How to tell – when you are over 70-year-old grandmother – to your grandchild that you have to get ready for a date with your new boyfriend?” (Lillian, aged 74)

Some seniors found it enjoyable to express their happiness: “We have to have our wedding in a church. We are going to have it, even if everyone would not approve it. We did not have it in our adolescence and finally now, when we are old, we have the opportunity to enjoy it. The marriage formula does not ask your age, nor have they set any hurried rhythm for the march towards the altar.” (Marjorie, aged 65)

Many seniors’ children support their new relationships. The immediate environment could also conform to the emotional flame of the elderly and be happy about it. “The children are content that we have each other as company. Indeed, you are not supposed to live your life so that you are just left alone to complain about your fate.” (Letty, aged 81)

5.4 Formalizing the Relationship by Getting Married

Opinions on formalizing their intimate relationships varied among the elderly who described their love stories. Others found it important to get married: “Two old people leading each other – I think it surely is worth formal crowning.” (David, aged 71)

Whereas some restrain themselves from marrying or living together with someone: “Nothing doing that I would shack up with him.” (Celia, aged 72) Uncertainty about the change in economic situation, giving up one’s freedom, and children’s resistance made them hesitate.

Yet, there were those, too, who wanted to get married fast. “What goes on and on, becomes complicated”, explained one senior. “Now, after we decided to get married officially, the outsiders were cleared up as well. This is the true foundation of our life and certainly those words ‘I will’ and ‘for better or for worse’ are valuable in this age too.” (Roy, aged 68, remarried after divorced from over 30-year-long marriage)

5.5 How Does the Experience of Falling in Love in Old Age Differ from the One Taking Place in Youth?

The elderly are facing a new phase in life. Most seniors are free from the burdens of gainful employment and moderate pension secures economic stability as well (see DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2009; Diener & Seligman, 2004). As the responsibility of raising children is bygone, many of the old point out that now they have time for their own life that they still have ahead. Now they have time for themselves and are free to do what they want: “During our whole adult life we have borne the responsibility of other people both at home and at work, worried and taken care of things for them; now we are allowed to live our own life” (Robert, aged 68). Love can be happier; one is able to indulge in it as one does not have the tension caused by work, buying a home, or children’s problems: “Loving is better when old than when young.” (Peter, aged 67)

In adolescence, the future is forthcoming. One has plans for the future and set the “after that”-intermediate goals. Seniors have experienced long past and they can draw much from it (Murrell, Salsman, & Meeks, 2003). They do not necessarily have pressures about the future and the exact prevailing moment is important. The ability to enjoy the present embodies many seniors’ life style: “The good moments are the small ones, here and now – I can enjoy these moments in a humble way.” (Barbara, aged 82)

Also the experiences of life give strength to make autonomous solutions (see Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996). In older age, one can more boldly liberate from others’ oppression, role expectations, and pressures of other people’s expectations and do what one self likes. Maturity may provide confidence (see Lawton *et al.*, 1999). The net of negations and responsibilities does not necessarily hold them. Independence from others gives courage. Old age may involve even revolutionary opportunities (see Rentsch, 1997).

5.6 What Does Love Give in Mature Age?

At its most genuine, mature love is manifested by active acts; in other words, giving, caring, the sense of responsibility, listening, and gratitude. Two equals to more, even in old age.

The seniors’ stories show how significant love and intimacy are for their self-esteem. The fact that one is accepted and loved without conditions as oneself is of unquestionable value especially along age (see Prieto-Flores *et al.*, 2011). “This senior love is more like the warm sense of togetherness: empathy and even the responsibility for the other. The fact that there is the one who understands is valuable” (Roy, aged 68)

Spouses are each other’s sympathizers, listeners, and helpers. They can enjoy and be happy about each other’s presence: “Knowing that sand flows in the hourglass gives the depth for the emotions as well as gratitude that one has been able to experience love as life-maintaining force.” (Linda, aged 82)

As life has been stormy and smarting from afflictions, the other’s company provides the safe nest. The elderly find shared evenings at home and berry-picking trips as well as going to cabin and doing gardening together refreshing. Little defects are forgotten and they do not have to face old age alone (see Newman *et al.*, 2010). However, among the elderly, there are those who take back the lost years and find new experiences. “Fewer goings would be enough, would they not’, wonder my children” tells Carol, aged 74.

In addition, the other showing his/her caring as well as approval of aging and appreciation showed by the other are considered important. “Love is a long-distance run, no spurt but a long finishing line. Together, even the burdens feel lighter to bear. Together we are strong”, says Kendall (been married for 53 years).

6. Discussion

6.1 Love does not Always Guarantee Happiness

I have described the experience of falling in love in old age through the stories the elderly wrote. According to these memorable and magnificent stories, old age seems bright. It may appear even too rosy. If only the positive sides of aging are described, the image of the reality in old age can become distorted. If the viewpoint is focused on the world experienced by the fit, active, and comfortably well-off, the overall picture of old age becomes narrower.

Standardizing aging as the oasis of active, energetic, and positive emotions represents an encouraging and promising future for many. Who would not yearn for this? Yet, there are dangers and shadows when drawing this kind of a picture about old age. As desirable as an active life situation is, and even if a senior was healthy and even wealthy, old age is not phenomenal fun making that one can choose by one's own desires and choices.

Good aging cannot be bought like a commodity. Diverseness of life and genotype provide some people with better possibilities in old age than for others. For some, aging will not mean immobilization and decrease in mental performance. Others have worse luck. Disabling degenerative diseases and dementia are inevitable part of aging for some people.

The voice of this article is focused and restricted in Finland that has a high standard of living and where the elderly are guaranteed health care and social security. The average life expectancy of the Finns has increased remarkably during the last decades as it has in other Nordic countries and Western Europe as well.

6.2 Senior Love as Resource and Health

Where can we find the keys for seniors' happy and good life? The experience of life, freedom, and wisdom are valuable but they will not help much if people do not have goals and plans. Health is crucial for the quality of life but even more significant source of zest for life for many is the knowledge that they are needed and they have a mission.

Love can become an important power of life for the elderly (Freund & Riediger, 2003). Along with giving and receiving love, people feel themselves important and useful. Whether love is directed in a life companion, children, grandchildren, fellow humans, or various forms of working and doing, arts, ideas, or solving the problems of existence, it is crucial that people preserve sufficiently powerful passions and dreams, maybe even illusions that inspire and make them feel alive. Regardless of age, love can act as an impetus for goals that give meaning to life (Schnitker, 2007).

Intimate relationships, family and love predict successful aging (Stock, Okun, & Benin, 1986). Close and happy human relationships make a good protection for stress and an excellent health insurance. "The friends are the torches by the path of life; they cannot make your way shorter but they will make it brighter." (Mary, aged 80, found a new friend after widowed from a 52-year-long marriage)

In happy love stories, a senior treats his/her partner with care, tenderness, encouragement, and support. This is how love reflects even in the wellbeing and quality of life of the elderly. Becoming accepted and loved as is, without any conditions, is invaluable especially in old age (Gordon & Chen, 2010). Thus, the model of good life is not standardized into one mold and the wellbeing of the most fragile individuals is guaranteed as well.

Myths and clichés skew this reality (Gekoski & Know, 1990). Despite their high age, the elderly do not have to sit by or aside and watch their life – they can fully participate (Angner et al., 2009). The experiences of life only strengthen the grasp on life in a way that a Chinese proverb emphasizes beautifully by stating that "the flower of experiences carry the fruit of wisdom".

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