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# Social cohesion and an age-friendly environment determine the life satisfaction of elderly people in rural areas: an integrative review of the literature

## Spójność społeczna i środowisko przyjazne starzeniu determinują satysfakcję życiową osób starszych zamieszkujących obszary wiejskie: integracyjny przegląd literatury

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STRESZCZENIE

**SPÓJNOŚĆ SPOŁECZNA I ŚRODOWISKO PRZYJAZNE STARZENIU DETERMINUJĄ SATYSFAKCJĘ ŻYCIOWĄ OSÓB STARSZYCH ZAMIESZKUJĄCYCH OBSZARY WIEJSKIE: INTEGRACYJNY PRZEGLĄD LITERATURY**

**Wprowadzenie.** Z powodu starzenia się globalnej populacji i stopniowego wzrostu długości życia, w niniejszej pracy wykorzystano przegląd literatury do określenia czynników wpływających na satysfakcję życiową osób starszych zamieszkujących na obszarach wiejskich. Tym samym skoncentrowano się na społecznościach przyjaznych starzeniu się, które umożliwiają osobom starszym możliwie jak najbardziej aktywne i niezależne życie oraz pozwalają na starzenie się na wysokim poziomie.

**Metody.** Zastosowano metodę integracyjnego przeglądu literatury zgodnie z zaleceniami PRISMA. Wyboru artykułów w języku angielskim dokonano według następujących kryteriów integracji: naukowości, trafności treści i aktualności. Przeszukanie literatury objęło bazy bibliograficzno-katalogowe Web of Science i PubMed z lat 2010-2020. Po selekcji dokonano jakościowej analizy zawartości danych.

**Wyniki.** Z pierwszych dwudziestu jeden artykułów poprzez analizę merytoryczną dziewięciu artykułów naukowych uzyskano wiedzę na temat satysfakcji życiowej osób starszych zamieszkujących na obszarach wiejskich. Zidentyfikowano dwie kategorie treści: spójność społeczna osób starszych oraz środowisko przyjazne starzeniu.

**Dyskusja i wnioski.** Spójność społeczna i środowisko przyjazne osobom starszym są ważne dla zapewnienia osobom starszym satysfakcji życiowej na obszarach wiejskich. Na podstawie przeglądu literatury można stwierdzić, że dominuje literatura skupiająca się na starzeniu się na obszarach miejskich. W przyszłości konieczne będzie zbadanie czynników wpływających na satysfakcję życiową w lokalizacjach geograficznych o podobnej wielkości oraz cechach kulturowych i społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe: **społeczność przyjazna starzeniu, jakość życia, obszary wiejskie, osoby starsze, starzenie się**

ABSTRACT

**SOCIAL COHESION AND AN AGE-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT DETERMINE THE LIFE SATISFACTION OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

**Introduction.** As the global population is ageing and life expectancy is gradually increasing, we wanted to use a literature review to study what determines the life satisfaction of older people in rural areas. In doing so, we focused on age-friendly communities that enable older people to live as actively and independently as possible and allow quality ageing.

**Methods.** The integrative literature review method in accordance with PRISMA guidelines was used. The selection of articles in English was made according to the following inclusion criteria: scientificity, content relevance and topicality. The literature search covered the bibliographic-catalogue databases Web of Science and PubMed, from 2010 to 2020. After selection, a qualitative content analysis was applied to the data.

**Results.** From the initial twenty-one articles, we gained an insight into the life satisfaction of the elderly in rural areas through a substantive analysis of nine scientific articles. Two content categories were identified: social cohesion of the elderly and age-friendly environment.

**Discussion and conclusion.** Social cohesion and an age-friendly environment are important for ensuring the life satisfaction of elderly people in rural areas. Based on a review of the literature, we found out that literature focusing on ageing in urban areas predominates. In the future, it will be necessary to study the factors that affect the life satisfaction in geographical locations that are similar in size and cultural and social characteristics.

Key words: **age-friendly community, quality of life, countryside, older adults, ageing**



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## THEORETICAL ORIGINS

Demographic change will increasingly affect people's behaviour as the number of older people in the entire population increases [1]. Globally, the proportion of people aged 65 and over represents about 10% of the population [2], which requires new strategies for caring for the quality of life of older people [3]. The elderly are a heterogeneous group [4] in which life satisfaction is influenced by holistic treatment [5], which puts the elderly at the centre and pays attention to them [6]. Successful ageing is associated with well-being and the ability to adapt to age-related changes [1], which is particularly important with older people who are subject to accelerated age-related changes [7]. We can approach the subject of ageing from two perspectives. One is the demographic point of view of ageing and the other one is the point of view related to the individual and chronological processes of ageing, biological changes and sociopsychological changes of ageing at the individual level [8].

One way to address the ageing population are age-friendly environments [9], which enable older people to participate in the community, stay connected to the people they care about, and stay healthy and active in old age. At the same time, such an environment offers support to those who cannot take care of themselves [10]. The World Health Organization has introduced the age-friendly environment concept into the context of cities, but this concept has also been extended to rural areas [9]. An age-friendly environment promotes active ageing, but there are differences between rural and urban areas. Older people living in the city are more satisfied with public transport, and they notice that connections in rural areas are poor or non-existent. An age-friendly environment for people in rural areas means that they can live at home, in a home environment. However, the distances they are required to travel to reach larger cities, shopping malls and neighbours is age-unfriendly. Nevertheless, older people in both rural and urban areas experience similar values and challenges [11].

The definition of rural areas is difficult to define precisely, but the term is often used for small and /or remote settlements. The term also varies from country to country. There are 212 municipalities in Slovenia with a population of approximately 2.1 million [12] and it is difficult to separate the urban and non-urban environments. The overall quality of life in rural areas is average [13] and depends on health, financial situation and family relationships [14].

The World Health Organization defines quality of life as the perception of an individual's position in life, within the cultural and value systems in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns [15]. Quality of life can be defined in several ways, making it difficult to measure and integrate into scientific studies. Lah and colleagues [16] use the terms successful ageing, good ageing, and positive ageing as synonymous with quality of life for older people. An important element of quality of life is the health of the elderly [17], which can be impaired in old age by motor disorders that reduce the quality of life [18]. Women living in urban areas pay more attention to their health than those in rural areas [5] and it is a healthy lifestyle that enables a quality life in old age [19]. Satisfaction with life in old age is very important [20], as confirmed by research, showing that older people living in rural areas are more satisfied with life than older people living in cities [21]. We notice that quality of life is a subjective, multifaceted construct that is defined and evaluated in several ways, as quality of life is a complex area of study [22].

By reviewing the literature, we wanted to identify the factors that affect the quality of life of the elderly in rural areas and life satisfaction. Based on the definition of the research problem, we formulated a research question: "What factors do affect the quality of life of older people in rural areas?".

## METHODS

The research used a descriptive method, an integrative literature review, which allows us to gain new knowledge about the research problem through the process of review, critique and then synthesis of the studied literature [23], in accordance with PRISMA guidelines [24]. The literature search included bibliographic-catalogue databases Web of Science (*Web of Science Core Collection, BIOSIS Citation Index, Current Contents Connect, Data Citation Index, Derwent Innovations Index, KCI-Korean Journal Database, Medline, Russian Science Citation Index*) and PubMed. When searching the literature, we considered inclusion and exclusion criteria (Tab. 1). Johnson in Lichter [25] noted that the share of depopulation in rural areas between 2010 and 2016 in the United States increased. Based on the above evidence and the fact that more attention has been paid to the challenges of ageing in recent years, we have decided to limit the literature review to the period from 2010 to 2020. To search for literature in English, we used the following keywords in different combinations: older, elderly, seniors, life satisfaction, active ageing, ageing place, villages, rural area, age-friendly community. Keywords were combined with Boolean operators (AND, OR) into different combinations (Tab. 2). The literature search ran until 6 November 2020. We selected evidence that was published in credible and international journals with an impact factor. This was one of the inclusion criteria.

Tab. 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for article search

| Criterion | Inclusion criterion | Exclusion criterion |
|---|---|---|
| Field | Life satisfaction of older people in rural areas | Other |
| Population | Residents of both sexes over 65 years of age | Residents of both sexes under 65 years of age |
| Language | English | Other languages |
| Publication time period | 2010-2020 | Older than 2010 |
| Type of publications | Published articles by COBISS typology (original, review, scientific) | Published articles – popular, professional unpublished material |
| Impact factor (JCR / SNIP) | Articles published in journals with an impact factor > 0 | Articles published in journals without an impact factor |

Tab. 2. Search strategy with Boolean logical operators

| | PubMed | Web of Science (WoS) |
|---|---|---|
| Search string | ((older) OR (elderly) OR (seniors)) AND ((life satisfaction) AND (active ageing) OR (ageing place)) AND (villages OR rural area) AND (age-friendly community) | TS=(older or elderly or seniors) and TS=(life satisfaction and active ageing or ageing place) and TS=(villages or rural area) and TS=(age-friendly community) |
| Number of hits | 9 | 14 |

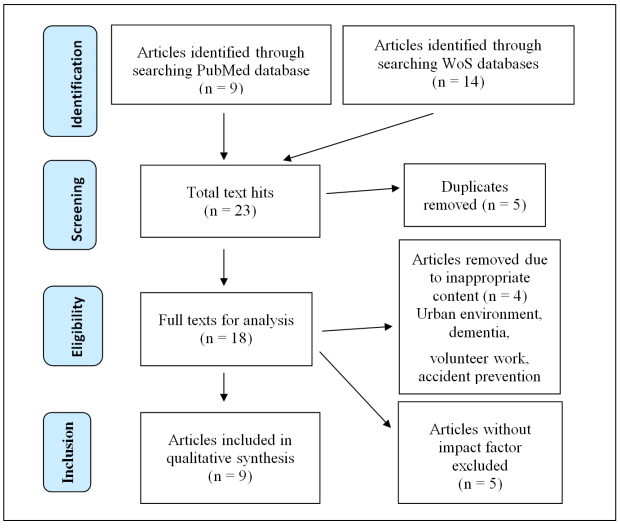



Fig 1. Prisma diagram [24] of the literature selection process

The analysis did not include articles published in journals without an impact factor (without JCR (Clarivate) – Journal Citation Report and / or SNIP (Scopus) – Source Normalized Impact per Paper) and articles that do not correspond thematically. Thus, 9 articles were included in the content analysis. Prisma diagram of the process of obtaining articles is shown in Fig. 1.

## RESULTS

Using different combinations of keywords, 23 articles in English were obtained from bibliographic databases during the search phase. A review of these articles limited the number to 9. The results of the literature review with authors, methodology, purpose and the main findings are presented in Tab. 3. The research studies were most often co-authored by two or more authors. All studies used

Tab. 3. Results of the substantive review with the main findings

| Authors and impact factor | Methodology | Purpose | Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Keating, Eales and Phillips [26]<br>IF* 0.917 | Qualitative and quantitative research (semi-structured interview, n = 106) | To present the concept of age-friendly communities in a rural environment and the contact between the elderly and the environment in which they live. | 'Age-friendly' needs to be understood in terms of diversity in communities and among the elderly. The age-friendly community strives to find the best relationship between the different needs of the elderly and the communities in which they live. The term age-friendly is dynamic and deals with change in terms of time, people and place. The literature pertaining to age-friendly communities is predominantly focused on the urban ageing model, and thus does not reflect the diversity of rural communities. |
| Neville et al. [27]<br>IF 1.424 | Qualitative research (semi-structured interview, n = 15) | To understand the impact of the physical environment and social networks so that older people in rural areas can remain involved in the community. | A stimulating physical environment is essential to support the community and social participation of older people. Social engagement (especially socialising with friends and neighbours) is very important for the elderly. |
| Krawchenko et al. [28]<br>IF 2.206 | Qualitative and quantitative research (spatial analysis research and population projection method) | To study the link between social vulnerability and place vulnerability, and the development of age-friendly communities in the county of Nova Scotia, where the trend of population ageing is very pronounced. Identify how coastal climate change can affect infrastructure and resources relevant to vulnerable older people in rural communities. | The current age-friendly community program does not take into account the impact of environmental change and its effects. The elderly are the most vulnerable group, due to the impact of climate change. Impacts are particularly problematic in the coastal region in rural areas, where the number of older people is growing, distances between residents and services are large, and residences are isolated. |
| Cho in Kim [29]<br>IF 2.449 | Qualitative research (data analysis) | The research provides insight into how older residents with low income can continue to live in their neighbourhood in a giant city that is changing spatially, socio - economically and in terms of population structure. | The neighbourhood is an important component that creates an age-friendly place in which to stay. An age-friendly ideology could serve as a framework for urban renewal, offering affordable homes, and the gradual transformation of cities. |
| Scharlach et al. [30]<br>IF 0.780 | Quantitative research (n = 80) | Exploring the importance of the village model - a social initiative that emphasises member involvement, access to services and community helps to become an age-friendly community. | Villages and community organisations may have untapped potential to facilitate ageing at home for as many people as possible, in compliance with the goals of age-friendly initiatives, while encouraging constructive change throughout the community. |
| John in Gunter [31]<br>IF 1.258 | Qualitative (mapping - MAPPS) and quantitative research (telephone survey, n = 237) | To understand the urban and rural context of on-site ageing to inform programs and policies. | The characteristics of the social, physical and service environment determine the perception of the population regarding whether the community is age-friendly.<br>The age-friendly flower-shaped model categorises the following characteristics of age-friendly cities: transportation, housing, outdoor space and buildings, social participation, respect and inclusion, civic cooperation, health services, and communication. |
| Menec in Nowicki [9]<br>IF 0.868 | Quantitative research (Cross-sectional study, n = 646) | To examine age-friendly communities and the relationship to the health status of older people in rural areas. | The findings show that an age-friendly environment (physical environment, residence, social environment, access to transport) is associated with the satisfaction of living in the countryside. Older people have been found to be equally satisfied with their lives, regardless of whether they live in a rural or urban environment. The findings support the idea that 'age-friendly' is associated with healthy and active ageing. |
| Freeman et al. [32<br>IF 3.390 | Quantitative research (group interview, n = 37) | To examine how the elderly (70+ years) have accepted the use of ICT and what the consequences are of the use of ICT in rural and urban environments. | The use of digital technologies strengthens social cohesion between generations.<br>When creating an age-friendly environment or helping older people at their place of residence, urban planners need to use ICT to facilitate intergenerational collaboration.<br>Intergenerational support for the use of ICT in the elderly has the effect of keeping them independent and able to age at their place of residence. |
| Nielson, Wiles and Anderson [33]<br>IF 1.295 | Qualitative research (case study, n = 12) | To examine how older people experience inclusion / exclusion in large retirement complexes with different personal characteristics of the elderly with a case study in Auckland, New Zealand. | Residents of the retirement complex were active in social groups that provided social interaction, society, and friendship to most seniors.<br>Large purpose-built complexes for the elderly offer new forms of ageing for wealthier seniors.<br>Social connections are fragile in such communities. Newcomers and the elderly in particular find themselves on the social margins. |

IF* – impact factor for the year the article was published

in this literature review were published in journals with an impact factor greater than zero. After a qualitative content analysis of the literature, we combined the findings into two categories – ***social cohesion of the elderly*** in an ***age-friendly environment***, which can be seen in Tab. 4.

Tab. 4. Synthesis of findings based on an integrative literature review

| Category | Content subcategory | Ref. |
|---|---|---|
| Social cohesion of the elderly | The possibility of social participation is perceived by the elderly as an important factor in the quality of life. | [27] |
| | The use of digital technologies strengthens social cohesion, while reducing the generation gap and enabling older people to age independently. | [32] |
| | In large retirement complexes, social groups provide social interaction to the elderly, although social connections in such complexes are fragile. | [33] |
| Age-friendly environment | The impacts of climate change are most pronounced in rural coastal regions, and their impact is not taken into account by the current age-friendly community program. | [28] |
| | The age-friendly community strives to find the best relationship between the different needs of the elderly and the communities in which they live. | [26] |
| | The neighbourhood network is an important component that creates an age-friendly living space. | [29] |
| | Age-friendly environment (physical environment, residence, social environment, access to transport) is associated with the satisfaction of living in rural areas. Age-friendly perception of the environment is associated with healthy and active ageing. | [9] |
| | An age-friendly place is defined by the following characteristics: transportation, housing, outdoor space and buildings, social participation, respect and inclusion, civic cooperation, health services and communication. | [31] |

## DISCUSSION

By reviewing the literature, we wanted to find out what affects the quality of life of older people in rural areas. We found that the social cohesion of the elderly and an age-friendly environment are factors that affect the quality of life of the elderly in rural areas. Menec and Nowicki [9] also found that the location of residence (city or countryside) does not affect life satisfaction, while older people in cities and rural areas point out similar problems and values [11]. However, the physical environment, residence, social environment and access to public transport are other factors that affect satisfaction with life in rural areas [5].

The literature pertaining to age-friendly communities focuses primarily on urban environments. The age-friendly community strives to find the best relationship between the different needs of the elderly and the communities in which they live [26]. The idea of age-friendly is focused primarily on social communities. This is an important point, because many everyday experiences of ageing take place in the neighbourhoods or communities [34]. The neighbourhood is an important component that creates an age-friendly place to live [29]. This leads to the fact that social interaction with the environment is important for the elderly, which is also confirmed by Bryla, Burzyñska and Maniecka-Bryla [14], who foud that regular social contacts affect the quality of life of the elderly. The possibility of social participation is defined by the elderly as an important factor in determining whether the environment is age-friendly [27]. Studying the age-friendly environment in rural areas is crucial, as the rural population is ageing faster than the population in urban centres [9]. Demographic change causes changes in the distance between family members as family size and age distribution alter [35]. We assume that the reason is the emigration of young people to the cities, while elderly parents remain in the countryside. The generation gap can be bridged through the use of information and communication technologies and properly regulated long-term care. The use of digital technologies strengthens social cohesion, while reducing the generation gap and enabling older people to age independently [32]. With the growing geographical separation between the elderly and family members, the role of information and communication technologies in strengthening and maintaining family ties is becoming more important [36]. Nedeljko et al. [37] foud that it would be necessary to adapt the technology, especially for older adults who primarily use ICT to connect with their friends and family.

The quality of urban neighbourhoods associated with life satisfaction in the elderly is determined by the following factors: access to public transport, access to shops and services, and the cleanliness of streets and footpaths. In addition to these indicators, the age-friendly index is also positively related to health. The findings thus support the idea that age-friendly is associated with active and healthy ageing [9]. The quality of life of the elderly depends on their health, financial situation and family relationships [14]. Lajhar [38] highlights health, independence, autonomy, maintaining social contacts and a stable economic situation as factors influencing the quality of life of the elderly. The older the people become, the lower they assess their quality of life [14, 39], but we need to be aware that quality of life is an individual experience and depends on life expectancy and perceptions of each individual's age [40], because the elderly generally require a person-centred approach [41].

## CONCLUSIONS

A review of the literature shows that research is largely focused on the life satisfaction in the urban environment, and less on the study of the quality of life of older people in rural areas. Because rural areas have different definitions and vary widely on a global level, it is difficult to compare rural areas in different parts of the world because there are cultural differences and differences in the geographical size of the area. In the study, we did not decide on a specific definition of rural area, but we used the general concept or country definition. Both represent a limitation of the research.

Through a review, critique and synthesis of the literature, we found that social cohesion and age-friendly communities are factors that have been identified in previous research as key factors influencing the life satisfaction

of older people in rural areas. This realisation is a contribution to the further development of social gerontology, which should not be overlooked by older people in rural areas living in a home environment. We must strive to keep the elderly in their home environment as long as possible, so we need quality long-term care that will be focused on the individual needs of individual persons. Further research should focus on studying the factors that affect the life satisfaciton in rural areas in geographical locations that are similar in size and cultural and social characteristics, taking into account the limitations mentioned above.

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