

# ADULT LEARNING ACTIVITIES, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND DIFFERENT NEIGHBOURHOODS

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**ABSTRACT:** This is a paper on adult education and learning activities within the neighbourhood that pays special attention to the social networks of the individual. It starts off with the thesis that life circumstances and social networks (especially family and neighbourhood) have a greater influence upon the understanding of the role and importance of education than age. We have analysed the quantitative and qualitative data from the research on social networks of the elderly in Slovenia and focused on two generations (parents and grandparents) at two different points in time (1987 and 2005). We have established that regardless of the various external encouragements, the most important factors for further learning are family values and the individual's attitude towards learning that is formed throughout life and is influenced by social networks.

**Key words:** adults; social networks; learning habits

## 1. Introduction

Current educational and sociological debates treat adult learning within the immediate social environment of family, working environment, friends, neighbourhood, local community, etc. This paper looks at the extent to which the adults in Slovenia are involved in their local environment and the consequences for their learning. It shows the influence of such social network elements as the neighbourhood and certain community organisations. We investigate the factors that influence the decline in learning activities with age. Learning activities includes formal and non-formal education as well as adult informal learning. Education contents, their degree and methods can differ greatly. We understand education as a means of establishing adult social networks that can provide both instrumental and emotional support, as well as socialisation. Learning can be an important element in reducing social exclusion, especially for older adults.

We start from the following suppositions:

- the living environment and social networks are importantly connected to one's learning activities;
- with age, the inclination to learn and the inclusion of adults into educational and neighbourhood activities is on the decline (in Slovenia); and
- in Slovenia the learning habits and needs of the generations that are yet to reach old age will differ significantly from the needs of the current generation of older adults.

The presented theses were checked through the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data within the frame of the research project on social integration of older adults in Holland.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Adult learning in the social context

Some authors (e.g., Bandura 1977) assert that the behaviour of the individual does not depend merely on her/his personal structure, but also on the situation in which she/he has found herself/himself. The social constructivism theoreticians (e.g., Gergen 1994; Wenger 1998) state that the learning process does commence with the individual. Instead they explain that the nature of this process is always defined by the relations within the social environment. Dialogue, the possibility to pose questions, simultaneous checking of the meaning and their own thesis within the group all represent an important learning process. This means that group cooperation is important in the social process of knowledge construction (Illeris 2004: 125).

Jarvis states that learning can be defined as a consequence of the diversification of the individual's biography and the socially created experience, which triggers the individual's self-questioning and learning. Learning defined in such a way is a necessity for mankind, for it is directly linked to life and is thus not restricted by certain social demands that are reflected by the goals set from the outside. With time one starts to respond to the social world that has formed them, for learning is an initiator of changes as well as their consequence (Jarvis 1992: 10). Schuller (2004: 24) claims that the consequences of learning are visible on the individual level (good for the individual) as well as on the collective/neighbourhood level (good for the broader community). The individual and the community can

1. In our research we have predominantly derived from Anglo-American empirical research on civic participation and adult education.

be observed in two dimensions directed at opposite poles: the first dimension brings changes to the individual's life through learning, while the second enables the individual or the community to preserve the existing conditions through learning. The effect of preservation is not as visible as the effect of changing.

In this relation Kilgore (1999: 192) states that the individualistically conceived theories of learning are not sufficient for the understanding of adult learning in the context of social changes. The theory of collective learning includes both individualistic and collective components. According to Kilgore the individualistic components (identity, the feeling of being a part of something, consciousness) and the collective development components (collective identity, collective consciousness, solidarity and organisation) have to be seen as a dialectic entity. The learning process of adults within a community should be understood as dependant on the collective factors and possibilities within the neighbourhood, but the individual's pre-dispositions and characteristics should by no means be neglected.

Wenger (1998) claims that as an interactive and contextually placed activity learning is a form of social capital. The social capital theories are based on the idea that social networks are important for the creation of the social capital. The concept of social capital has moved the attention from the merely individual actors to the patterns of relations between various actors, social units and institutions. Thus, it represents the link between the micro, mezzo and macro level of analysis, i.e., between the individuals, small groups and the broader social structure.

## 2.1. Social capital, learning and civil participation

In the discussions that support the interconnection between social capital, learning and civil participation, thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam are most highlighted. Bourdieu defines social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu 1986: 248). According to Coleman, social capital is 'defined by its function. It is not one whole entity, but it represents differences of resources, which have two groups of characteristics: all are made of some social structure's points of view and they make an easy individual's activity in his structure' (Coleman 1994: 302). The basic ingredients of social capital are trust, networks, participation and norms of reciprocity. Later, a powerful focus of debate became Putnam's well-known analysis of declining social capital in the United States. He discussed social capital

as follows: 'social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam 2000: 19). When Putnam assessed the benefits of social capital he stressed that where trust and social networks flourish, individuals, neighbourhoods, firms, and even nations prosper.

In the empirical investigations of social capital, two main research approaches can be identified. The network approach is micro oriented; it focuses on network resources that refer to those embedded in one's ego-networks (Lin 2001: 15). Theoretically this approach is less elaborated, however the level of operationalisation and the methodology of the empirical research are very well developed. In opposition to this the approach introduced by Putnam is macro (or mezzo) oriented, socio-centric. It is theoretically more reflective, however its operationalisation and methodology are not as coherent and rigorous.

The social capital has encouraged a whole line of empiric researches and theoretical debates that contributed to a better understanding of the non-formal education and informal learning, human contacts, networks and organisational forms for the quality of life.

Using conventional proxies such as generalised social trust (trust in generalised other) and associational involvement based on data obtained from international surveys (World Values Survey, European Values Survey, European Social Survey) the stock of social capital in Slovenia show the following trends (Adam 2007: 26–34). In 1990, 39 percent of the respondents were members of at least one voluntary organisation while in 1999 and 2002 their share rose to 52 percent. In addition the percentage of respondents who agreed that most people could be trusted was 17.4 percent in 1990, 21.7 percent in 1999 and 24.2 percent in 2002. Despite the positive trends it is possible to establish that Slovenia is a country with a relatively low level of social capital stock in comparison with most 'old' EU member states.

The data from the Slovenian Public Opinion Survey (Toš 2005: 190) indicates that the level of interpersonal trust is the highest within the family (91.2 percent in 2003). However this type of trust can represent a potential for mistrust and keeping distance from other social groups and social environments, which in turn leads to a negative social capital. Following the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991 when Slovenia became an independent country, the level of trust in state institutions was relatively high, but 10 years later this trust, with the exception of educational institutions, has fallen significantly (Kump 2003: 165). The lack of social capital is also shown in the lack of cooperation and trust between various associations, for amongst them one can often notice reciprocal disinterest, tension, conflicts or even competition.

Data from Field's research indicates that social capital leads to 'learning', but not the sort that supporters of human capital development would wish for (Field 2005). His findings broadly support the hypothesis that civic involvement supports adult learning. Non-formal education and informal learning can enable community members to achieve outcomes of their choice and to promote community well-being. When informal learners approach those with greater expertise and experience than themselves, they are inclined to exchange knowledge and information through discussion, bouncing ideas around, advising in collaborative, interactive and inclusive ways (Harrison 2003).

## 2.2. Neighbourhood and learning

In most of the initial discussions the geographical dimension was paramount in defining a set of people as a community (such as the residents of a particular neighbourhood). But it became clear that communities can be regarded as actively constructed by their members, not merely arising from local circumstances.

We start from the geographical principle of a community, but we are also interested in certain social relationships which take place within a geographically defined area (neighbourhood). We observe the neighbourhood as a community. As Loughran (2003: 89) states, a neighbourhood is a social unit that is defined by physical and social borders. In some cases community boundaries are rigidly maintained, while in others they are more fluid and open. Communities may be seen to be inclusive to some people and social groups, but exclusive to others. On the other hand communities can also be elitist and oppressive – the dominant norms may be damaging to the confidence and identity of anyone, who deviates from the existing standards of acceptable behaviour. Gilchrist (2004: 9) asserts that people who can not or do not want to fit into this framework either pretend to conform or are ostracised.

The threads that link people within a neighbourhood differ as regards their strength, direction and density. Woolcock (2001: 13) differentiates the links amongst the people in a community on the basis of different goals and interests into three types:

- bonding (based on long-term, reciprocally bonding relations between people who are close to each other – for instance friends, family, relatives);
- bridging (connections between people who have a bit less in common, maybe a joint interest – for instance between neighbours, co-workers, other people in the community); and

- linking (connections between people or organisations with a similar status, so that they can reach new sources).

The neighbourhood development is currently more focused on strengthening the ‘weak ties’ within the network, with which the various gaps between the social groups are bridged and social cohesion is preserved (‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ are put into the forefront). This is in opposition to the previous research, which mainly studied the ‘strong links’ between relatives and close friends in neighbourhoods and villages. Solid, relative ties are especially important in single-identity groups, based on a common culture or in order to increase the cohesion in town neighbourhood where they are divided due to social divisions (e.g., ethnicity).

Many people get involved in community activities in order to meet people and gain a sense of belonging (Ferlander 2004). The personal relationship and social networks established through community activities are beneficial to people’s well-being (offer information and advice; help in crises; informal care; emotional support, etc.). Family and friends provide different kinds of support compared to neighbours; people with diverse networks (maintained through a variety of activities) seem to exist on a higher level of satisfaction than those with an intensely supportive, but homogenous set of relationships (Gilchrist 2004: 8).

The level of reciprocal connection and inclusion of people into a neighbourhood are shown as expressed feeling within a neighbourhood, mutual trust, the share and role of neighbours in the support network of an individual. Learning is an activity that numerous authors do not see as an individual activity but as a social or communal one. Wenger (1998) speaks of ‘communities of practice’, in which social learning takes place, which originates from the individual’s everyday life experience (in private life as well as at work). Lave and Wenger (1991) talk about ‘situated learning’ – instead of gaining knowledge learning is placed in the heart of social relationships; it is the co-participating situation from which we learn.

Informal contacts, groups of friends and groups within neighbourhoods appear to be important elements for linking people. Preston (2004: 121) asserts that social capital is the result of informal as well as formal forms of adult participation in community activities. As an indicator of social capital, the network structure has an important influence on the educational structures of individuals (Strawn 2003: 53). People with a strong and closely knit network (in most cases this is a family network) are less likely to get involved in organised education, particularly formal (they have 70 percent lesser participation in formal adult education when compared to individuals with a small social network). At the same time a closely knit network predicts a five times greater activity in the field of

informal learning (Strawn 2003: 45). Adults with a larger and looser network are more likely to get involved in organised forms of formal and non-formal education (Strawn 2003: 43). Strawn claims that tightly knit, often closed and self-sufficient networks predict a lesser chance to participate in any sort of education and learning processes. Research shows that in Slovenia the individual's social network declines with age; thus the family network becomes increasingly important, and for some the integration into their social environment also gains on importance (an important role of the neighbours) (Filipovič *et al.* 2005). In 2002 the share of neighbours in the network amounted to somewhere between 4 and 7 percent; a much greater percentage of neighbours in networks was discovered amongst the elderly, widowed, less educated and amongst people from village settings (Filipovič *et al.* 2005).

Alheit (1999: 67) is of the opinion that it is necessary to develop educational activities on the mezzo level of society, that enables the individuals to get acquainted with the structural diversity of the modern world that they can study. In her project ('The granddad project') Boström (2002: 522) asserts how intergenerational learning influence the creation of social capital. In life an individual chooses from a whole array of possibilities for education and learning; he/she is confronted with the continuum of norms that arise from various situations (hierarchically created, formal norms or spontaneously created, informal norms). As Boström claims the norms and structure 'constitute the dimensions of the social capital' (Boström 2002: 521), which emerge under the influence of the various relations within a social network.

In Slovenia the offer for adult learning has become much more rich and diverse in the last 15 years. Since the declaration of Slovene independence in 1991, the traditional network of adult educational institutions has been broadened significantly. New institutions were established (for example self-directed learning centres, learning exchange centres, universities for the third age, centres for project learning for the young adults, information and counselling centres) and new forms and programmes were introduced (study circles, non-formal education and learning, open and distance learning, project learning, a certification system, programmes for decreasing functional literacy, citizenship education, etc.) (Jelenc 2001: 273).

Further analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered on family stories in Slovenia will identify the characteristics of learning, the inclusion of the family within the neighbourhood and particular social networks of family members.

### 3. Research methodology

The presented data was gathered within the research project entitled 'Social integration of older adults in Slovenia'. The intention of this research was to monitor the changes in the social support networks of the elderly. We have used the measuring instrument developed by Antonucci (1986) especially for the quantitative measurement of the networks of the elderly, which enables us to monitor various types of social support as well as social support networks in the past. We have gathered quantitative data for three generations within a family, at two points in time (2005 and 1987). We have added qualitative data on education and changes in social support networks. The complementary manner of combining quantitative and qualitative methods was used because of the detail it shows within the research problems and the more in depth results it offers. Holland and Campbell (2005: 5) are of the opinion that the data obtained by one method examines, explains and enriches the data gathered with a different method.

For the measurements in the past (middle aged adults and the elderly around 1987) we have used the retrospective measurements for the reconstruction of social networks – their composition and structure was monitored as regards the roles in the life cycle. Through this we obtained longitudinal and cross-section linear points. We have enriched our research by adding a quantitative method at which we monitored the networks of three generations within the same family and obtained longitudinal data by measuring the networks of today's elderly in the past. Thus we obtained the possibility of observing the cross-section of two generations. We have used the so-called substitute reporters (reports of the elderly as regards their networks in the past); we have reduced the influence of memory with the use of measurement techniques (regenerating feelings, the context of the past and posing various different questions as regards the past) (Hlebec *et al.* 2007: 217).

With the case study research approach, the precise idiographic approach and explanation (Mesec 1998: 44) we have tried to conceive specific characteristics of selected cases and their inclusion into the particular local environment. We have considered the limitations of specific idiographic research, particularly the generalisation based on the analysis of selected cases. We have compared implicit and explicit theories of behaviour and through analytical induction tried to reach conclusions as regards the reasons for participating in education and learning. Our research has been founded on Strauss and Corbin (1990), as well as Glaser and Strauss (1967) concepts on the 'grounded theory'; it is an inductive inference from the series of data, which does not allow deduction. The findings of our research thus have more the characteristics of a bounded theory than



findings that could be generalised. The research process itself was an important part of the examination and was analytically observed and considered.

### 3.1. Sample and data collection

Data gathering took place over a 4-week period in spring 2005 amongst a number of students from the University of Ljubljana. The research included 124 families (331 persons), who participated in the quantitative and qualitative research. All of the respondents filled in the questionnaire (quantitative data), while qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews. The data was gathered by well trained students from three faculties (Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Health Sciences) in which most of the students are female. This also influenced the selection of the relation line in the research,<sup>2</sup> thus the sample is not representative. Every student described her/his family with guidelines defined in advance and selected an appropriate line of monitoring (student – one of the parents – one of the grandparents from the selected line of parents).

As our sample is a quota sample we have found it difficult to include rigorous statistical analyses as our sample does not permit statistical generalisation on the general population.

In the entire 1987 sample (331 persons) women represented 84 percent of all respondents, while in 2005 they represented 86 percent of the total respondents. In 1987 the average age of the respondents in the second generation (mother/father) was 32 years, which increased to 50 by 2005. In 1987 the representatives of the third generation (grandmother, grandfather) were 58 years of age on average, while in 2005 their average age increased to 75.

The formal education level of the parents (second generation) has not changed considerably between 1987 and 2005; the share of those who have completed comprehensive education has risen slightly. In both selected points of time the grandparents (third generation) have significantly lower education than their children (second generation). Approximately 75 percent have 3 years of vocational school or less (most of them had only completed their primary education if that), less than 15 percent have completed comprehensive education and only a few percent have a university degree (Table 1).

2. Because female students are more likely to choose their mothers and grandmothers as their role models the female line dominated.

**TABLE 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample**

	<i>Age</i>			<i>Education</i>			<i>Place of living</i>			
	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Three – year vocational school or less</i>	<i>Secondary school</i>	<i>University education</i>	<i>Larger town</i>	<i>Suburb</i>	<i>Small town</i>	<i>Village</i>
1987										
2nd generation	21	57	32	37%	38%	25%	20%	16%	20%	44%
3rd generation	45	81	58.5	79%	14%	7%	15%	14.5%	20%	50.5%
2005										
2nd generation	39	69	50	35%	39%	27%	16%	16%	22%	46%
3rd generation	63	90	75	77%	14%	9%	8%	20%	20%	52%

In the sample there are great differences in the education level between those adults who live in town and those who live in a rural setting. In both points of time (in 1987 and in 2005) and with both generations (parents and grandparents) most of the higher educated (university education) lived in larger towns or suburbs of larger towns, while most of the lower educated (vocational school or less) lived in villages. In the generation of the grandparents (third generation) one-third of all questioned had lower education (mostly primary school or less).

### 3.2. Analysis of quantitative data

The learning activities of the respondents have changed slightly over the 18-year period. In 1987, 52 percent of the respondents from the second generation (parents) were involved in a learning process,<sup>3</sup> and a similar percentage was educationally active in 2005 (52 percent). The third generation grandparents were not as educationally active: only 16 percent in 1987, and by 2005 this share dropped to 11.5 percent. These data show

3. We have defined as educationally active those adults who participated in adult education (either formal or non-formal) and in informal learning.

**TABLE 2. Average network size**

	<i>n</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>1. circle</i>	<i>2. circle</i>	<i>3. circle</i>
1987					
2nd generation	123	13.05	3.28	5.24	4.45
3rd generation	121	12.95	4.32	4.74	3.84
2005					
2nd generation	124	14.35	3.62	5.15	5.55
3rd generation	93	14.6	4.69	5.35	4.51

that the inclination and the factual inclusion into learning activities of the oldest inhabitants is on the decrease with age (see also Kump and Jelenc Krašovec 2007).

For every person included in the questionnaire and interviews we ascertained the size of the network, the share of relatives, friends, co-workers within the network and the composition of the social support network (percentages in concentric circles<sup>4</sup>) which explains the individual's possibilities of giving and receiving emotional, material and informational support as well as socialisation (Table 2).

The individual's network grows through time. In 1987 the generation of the parents as well as that of the grandparents had an average of 13 people in their personal social support networks, while in 2005 the average was between 14 and 15. The level of education does not influence the size of the individual's network, only with the highest educated grandparents (university education) the network tends to be a bit smaller. According to the data for 2005 the size of the network of those who are learning is larger than the networks of those who are not involved in learning. This holds true for the generation of parents as well as grandparents.

According to our data the experience of reciprocal help within a neighbourhood has changed between 1987 and 2005 – in 2005 over 50 percent of the respondents stated that only those who know each other well help each other (in 1987 the same share of respondents was of the opinion that everybody helps out). Thus, the feeling of security is smaller than it was in 1987. However, two-thirds of the respondents are still of the

4. The measuring instrument developed by Antonucci graphically presents the network in three concentric circles into which the respondents have to place the members of their network. In the first, inner circle are the people closest to them, usually their partner, children, maybe their best friend. The second circle includes individuals who are still very important to the respondent – extended family, friends and neighbours. The third circle includes people who are more distanced, change more often and are not the most important providers of social support (Hlebec *et al.* 2007: 218).

**TABLE 3. Experience of the neighbourhood**

	<i>How is it in your neighbourhood</i>			<i>I feel that the people in my neighbourhood/village accept me</i>			
	<i>People help each other</i>	<i>Everybody only looks after his own interest</i>	<i>Only people who know each other will help each other</i>	<i>I do not agree</i>	<i>I do not agree nor disagree</i>	<i>I agree</i>	<i>I absolutely agree</i>
1987							
2nd generation	56%	5%	39%	2%	17%	64%	17%
3rd generation	54%	5%	41%	1.5%	8%	70%	20.5%
2005							
2nd generation	29.5%	11.5%	59%	0	17%	74%	9%
3rd generation	34%	12%	53%	1%	12%	67%	20%

opinion that they are accepted by the people in their neighbourhood (Table 3).

In the continuation we will analyse the influence of various social network elements on individual's learning activities in the selected case studies.

#### 4. Qualitative analyses

The in-depth interviews on educational activities and social networks were performed by the parents and grandparents from 33 families, therefore 66 persons were interviewed (qualitative data). The rigorous statistical analysis is thus not possible in our study. The interviews were carried out by students of the Faculty of Arts. Only female students were involved in the project (100 percent); in the second generation (parents) females represented 79 percent, while in the third generation (grandparents) 92 percent. With the analysis we have try to show whether there are any set patterns for learning activities amongst the parents and grandparents. We have selected three different cases of learning within the family in the context of the living environment. Every student prepared the family presentation, the neighbourhood description and the inclusion of the

family into the neighbourhood. We have analysed the characteristics of the social network for each selected individual.

We will show a general description of the three typical types of living environments, identified on the basis of the students' descriptions and the analysis of the interviews.

#### 4.1. Rural settlement

*4.1.1. Characteristics of a rural settlement:* A student described the rural surroundings as very well developed and extremely safe. There are no great economic differences amongst the inhabitants and all of them are Slovene by nationality. The neighbours trust each other and help each other out, they have excellent relationships. There are quite a few active associations in the village and most of the villagers participate in one or the other. The village has its own voluntary fire brigade, cultural as well as sport association. The village is also a parish so it has its own vicar. With its activities the Catholic Church plays an important role and represents the centre of the neighbourhood. The villagers often gather and socialise in the vicarage, for apart from the choir a lot of other activities also take place there. All residents of the village centre know each other and socialise.

*4.1.1.1. FAMILY 1.* The student described her four-member family (parents, daughter, grandmother) as a typical farming family and her parents have been used to working hard all of their lives. They are also accustomed to a modest lifestyle. Her father spends a lot of his time in the workshop, and her mother spends her time in the garden. They get along well and they enjoy each other's company. However, they do not express their feelings that often. All of the family are regular church-goers. Parents are active in the parish life, especially the father. He helps out with odd jobs in the church and he sings in the church choir. The father also helps with the other activities in the village: he is a voluntary fireman and a member of the civil protection. Both parents regularly participate in the pilgrimages organised by the vicar.

*4.1.2. Mother's social network:* The mother (Majda) has a relatively small social network (eight people), which in 1987 included relatives as well as a few co-workers, while in 2005 her entire social network consisted of relatives (in the first circle partner, children and parents, in the second brothers and sisters). Majda states that she shares her problems exclusively with her relatives and that she does not socialise with anybody else then her relatives. This is therefore a closed family network that is not oriented towards the neighbourhood. Mainly the contacts with the people in her social network take place on a daily basis within the household. A smaller part of her contacts are occasional, they take place once a month or even

less, and the people do not live in her town (most probably these are distant relatives).

*4.1.3. Learning activities of the mother:* The mother (Majda) completed primary school, for due to the poor conditions (poverty, her father sympathised with the Nazis) she did not have the possibility for further education. Her husband has completed a vocational school. Majda does not participate in the common village activities, she is more held-back. She did express an interest in learning, for she would like to enrol in a group for learning foreign languages if she had the opportunity. As regards her current capabilities and inclination towards learning (when compared to the past) she has stated the following:

SIS – 227 – 2 – Majda – 2005:

There is a great difference. In the past I would study different things than I would today. At the time I was younger and I would learn much easier than now. Now I am old and I can't learn as easily as I could 18 years ago.

Her learning activities are limited to the family. She stated:

SIS – 227 – 2 – Majda – 2005:

I often help my grandchildren at their studies and homework. That makes me study, and at the same time they are learning from me. I also help them write their essays, as well as with their maths and other subjects.

She does not share her knowledge with other members of the neighbourhood. She stated this very clearly:

SIS – 227 – 2 – Majda – 2005:

No. We do not have a lot of contacts with the villagers.

*4.1.4. Grandmother's social network:* The grandmother (Tereza) has an average size social network (14 people), which in 1987 and 2005 consisted entirely of relatives. The average age of the people in her social network is 55 years. Her first social network circle includes seven people – children, brothers and sisters – with whom she has most of her everyday contacts; they are her most important alters who offer various types of social support. This data shows that the elderly in rural environments depend mainly on their relatives and if they do not have them they are mainly left to their own resources. Tereza's contacts with important persons are different – 40 percent of them are everyday contacts, limited to the household, while the remaining contacts are less frequent and with more distant relatives.

*4.1.5. Learning activities of the grandmother:* Student's grandmother (Tereza) (86 years old) attended an Italian primary school and later trained to be a dressmaker. Similar to the mother, the grandmother also spends a lot of her time in the house. She rests a lot. The grandmother is also from a farming background and is used to a modest and hardworking life. The student found it interesting that even the grandmother, who has only completed an Italian primary school, regularly reads all newspapers and magazines that she comes across.

She responded to the question if she is still in the learning process as follows:

SIS – 227 – 3 – Tereza – 2005:

No, I am too old for it. I am old. I have no reason to learn new things.

Regardless of this answer she responded to the question as regards her interests and what she would still like to learn with the following answer:

SIS – 227 – 3 – Tereza – 2005:

I am still interested in medical care. I am also interested in dressmaking and embroidery. These are my main interests.

*4.1.6. A comparison of the learning activities of the parent and grandparent in FAMILY 1:* Mother and grandmother have a similar attitude towards learning. Both are of the opinion that they are too old to learn new things, even though both have also stated the courses they would take if they were younger. The grandmother would attend dressmaking and embroidery courses, while the mother is interested in medical care, ecological farming as well as Italian, Spanish and English language courses – that is if she was young today.

Their networks consist of exclusively relatives and do not include friends or neighbours with whom they would socialise or offer reciprocal help. This is in contradiction to the description given by the student as regards the neighbourhood, for she stated that the neighbours help and trust each other. The father is extremely active in the neighbourhood, while the mother obviously does not feel confident enough to participate in these activities. She has clearly shown that she likes to learn and that she is interested in a number of things that she can not fulfil. Her work is limited to the family, which is also the case with the grandmother. This might be the influence of a traditional patriarchal (Catholic) understanding of family and community life, in which the males are more active in the neighbourhood while the women are more active at home.

## 4.2. Suburban settlement of detached houses

*4.2.1. The characteristics of the settlement of detached houses:* The student assessed life as relatively safe, even though safety is being threatened due to the constant newcomers moving into the neighbourhood. The settlement is well maintained, the inhabitants are predominantly Slovenes, but there are a few representatives of different nationalities from former Yugoslavia. She reports that the relations between neighbours are getting worse, people are becoming alienated. This is supposedly the consequence of the new families that are moving in. There are fewer links and less cooperation with the newly arrived, especially young families. However, the relations between those neighbours, who have lived here for a number of generations, are relatively good. There are no important activities that would bring the neighbourhood together; the only event that they organise jointly is the celebration of Labour Day. The inhabitants live rather isolated lives, contacts are limited to the nearest neighbours, there are less and less activities that bring them together and even though such activities exist, only a part of the neighbourhood is involved in them. This also has a great influence on the organisation of the learning activities which are left to the individuals and their initiatives.

*4.2.1.1. FAMILY 2.* The student describes her family as alienated, for the relations amongst the family members are not open and warm. The four member family of the student (father, mother and two daughters) belongs amongst the newly arrived (1985) and do not have intensive contacts with most of the other families. The parents have built a summer house in a settlement 10 km away and that is where they spend almost all of their free time. The parents and grandparents do not live together.

*4.2.2. Mother's social network:* The mother (Mira) has an average size social network (13 alters), in which her relatives who represent 70 percent of her network were the most important in 1987 and 2005. In both years the first two circles of her network consisted only of relatives (100 percent), which means that she has a predominantly family social network – she receives all support from her relatives, friends and neighbours are irrelevant. In 1987 the third circle included co-workers as well as friends that she trusted, while in 2005 she had occasional contacts merely with co-workers and the more distant relatives. From all alters that she named in 2005 she only trusts her relatives. She has no friends or neighbours that she would socialise with. In 2005 two-thirds of the contacts (70 percent) with the members of her network took place on a daily or weekly basis; half of her contacts were limited to the household or neighbourhood.

*4.2.3. Learning activities of the mother:* The mother (Mira) has completed primary school and a dressmaking course, while her husband has a



university degree. Mother's only interest is housework. She is not a member of any association or voluntary organisation in her neighbourhood, nor is she involved in any form of education. She has no interests, no will, she only works in the house and summer house and in the gardens or takes care of the pets. She can not find a true contact with the two daughters. According to the description of the student she is a totally non-communicative person.

When asked if she has been in any sort of education process in the past, the response was short:

SIS – 202 – 2 – Mira – 1987:

I didn't get any education back then, in 1987.

When asked as regards learning for her own joy, the answer was much the same. The response to the question whether she would like to enrol into a learning group, if she had the possibility, was clear:

SIS – 202 – 2 – Mira – 2005:

No, not really. I'm not bothered. I do not have the patience to sit and listen. I am too old to learn now. Maybe before.

She would also not enrol into the University for the third life period, as is clearly seen in her response:

SIS – 202 – 2 – Mira – 2005:

No, by no means. No. I don't feel like ... sitting and listening ...

*4.2.4. Grandmother's social network:* The grandmother (Stanka) has a relatively large network (16 people), which was (in 1987 as well as in 2005) constituted exclusively from relatives (100 percent). In 1987 the first two circles included 10 people, which were exclusively relatives; in 2005 these two circles included nine relatives. This is obviously a family network, which is a pattern carried through to the second generation. Most activities related to giving and receiving social support as well as socialising is limited to family members. Half of Stanka's contacts with the stated alters are irregular and rare (less than once a month), most probably because more than half of them live far away. The remaining contacts are limited to the household and are daily. She has no contacts with the neighbours.

*4.2.5. Learning activities of the grandmother:* The grandmother (Stanka), who has a higher level of formal education (secondary school) than her daughter (primary school), got married and moved from the city to her

husband's village. She is not content in the neighbourhood in which most inhabitants are closely linked. Together with her husband they occasionally participate at pensioner's meetings, otherwise they spend most of their time taking care of their garden, home, family and pets.

Similar to the mother, the grandmother also has a negative attitude to learning. The grandmother thinks that she has no learning interests, because she lives in a non-stimulative environment, especially when compared to her life in the city, where she attended the opera, theatre and concerts when she was young. She states that she would like to learn today, however:

SIS – 202 – 3 – Stanka – 2005:

... we are too far away from Novo mesto (the closest town), I can't. No, there is nothing here. Nothing at all! There is not even a local council, even though there should be one, I'll tell you that for nothing (a bit exited)! Yes, it's true! There is a fire brigade and there used to be a local council, but when the president of the local council became the mayor, he abolished the local council, so there (slightly angry)! And he abolished a number of villages!

She does not feel too good in the village surroundings, she does not socialise with anyone, except for the next door neighbour whom she helps out. Her desire for learning is strongly linked to the environment, for she stated the following:

SIS – 202 – 3 – Stanka – 2005:

... no, no. Now I have no enthusiasm left. Once I moved from Ljubljana to the Dolenjska region all of my enthusiasm deserted me.

She is of the opinion that living in a large town positively influences learning and other activities:

SIS – 202 – 3 – Stanka – 2005:

Well, there are more people, you can go places. Here you haven't got anywhere to go, nowhere at all.

She thinks that most of the villagers are drunks, hypocrites and liars. This is why she does not go anywhere and does not wish to join any groups. In reality she is very lonely, a depressed person with unfulfilled desires.

*4.2.6. Comparison of the learning activities between the parent's and grandparent's generations in FAMILY 2:* Mother and grandmother have similar views on education. They both have a negative stance towards it, they have no interest in it even though their reasons for this are different.

The mother is not interested in the encouragement from her surroundings. The grandmother is of the opinion that she lives in a totally non-stimulative environment – if she were still in the town where she used to live, she would go to the opera, theatre, concerts, things she used to do before she got married. Her husband is not interested in these things. A negative attitude, bitterness and cold relationships have also been noticed with the first generation. The student describes the neighbourhood as increasingly alienated; she has noticed that there are no activities that would bring the neighbours closer. The patterns of dissatisfaction are obviously passed from one generation to another. Both mother and grandmother have merely a family network, both only trust relatives. We can see how the dissatisfaction (with the living environment, and possibly also with life in general) in the grandmother (third generation) has consequentially formed into a general disinterest in the mother (second generation). It is possible that this emerged from the family environment in which she grew up. This is now also felt by the first generation, which feels that the conditions are stale and threatening, and that they discourage any sort of learning process. This is an extremely closed family community.

#### 4.3. A council estate in a town

*4.3.1. The characteristics of a council estate:* The student describes a council estate in a medium sized town. The inhabitants are nationally heterogeneous (Slovenes, Croatians, Bosnians, Serbs). They have neighbourly relationships, which can be good, but they have no neighbourhood spirit for the neighbourhood as a whole. People who live in the neighbourhood from the very beginning have stronger bonds as do dog walkers, pupils or those individuals with allotments.

4.3.1.1. FAMILY 3. The student describes the four member family (parents, daughter, son) that lives on a council estate in a medium sized town. According to the student their family is rather introvert, they trust each other and offer support and they can always rely on a family member. They have a feeling of belonging within the family, they are fond of each other, and they express and show this. Of course certain disputes or misunderstandings arise, but they try to solve them as soon as they appear. The family has good and friendly relations with their neighbours; however they are not closely tied with the neighbourhood as such. The family members participate in the work actions, such as cleaning up the building surroundings and they also lend a hand with other things, such as moving, various repairs, etc. The father helps an elderly woman to change her light bulbs and similar. The mother looks after the neighbour's apartments

(watering the plants, etc.) when the neighbours are away. She also looks after children and similar.

*4.3.2. Mother's social network:* The mother (Jelka) has an above average social network (17 people) that consists of relatives and others. In 1987 and 2005 relatives represented approximately half of her network, but an important role was played by friends and co-workers. She entrusts her problems merely to her relatives. This means that only her relatives offer her emotional support, while other types of support are also received from other alters in her network. She has regular contacts (70 percent of all her contacts are daily or weekly) with most of the important people from her network, but most of them come from her closer environs (household, neighbourhood). A part of her contacts are rarer and they take place with more distant, but still important people in her network.

*4.3.3. Learning activities of the mother:* The mother (Jelka) completed the school for administration, while her husband completed the electric engineering vocational school. In their free time they attend various events, especially the concerts that are held at the music school. If possible they also like to go to the theatre, but in their settlement and its surroundings they do not have a great selection of cultural activities at their disposal. The parents have recently joined a marketing network, within the frame of which they attend daily and weekend seminars and read various books.

The mother has a high opinion of education and also thinks that attending various seminars and lectures helps strengthen her confidence, keeps her young and is good for her mind. She also added:

SIS – 229 – 2 – Jelka – 2005:

I like to visit the library. The two of you with Boštjan help me with this, well mainly you; I go to the library to collect a book for you and I wander from shelf to shelf looking. Then I find something and take it home and read it . . . I like it the way it is, I also like to attend events in our town, cultural events, I like to participate and attend.

The mother would also join a study group, because:

SIS – 229 – 2 – Jelka – 2005:

I mean for me, I have always said, that when I retire I will go back to school again, because I am interested in what used to be, why things are as they are and not different . . . I like it because I realise that I could contribute . . . for myself and others; I could be of use.

4.3.4. *Grandmother's social network:* (The mother responded for her, because the grandmother died in the time that passed between 1987 and 2005).

In 1987 the grandmother (Anica) had a network (eight people), which comprised of family and friends. She had regular daily or weekly contacts with a small percentage of people and occasional contacts with most of them. It is interesting that most of her alters did not live in the proximity, which also explains the fact that she did not socialise with them as frequently.

4.3.5. *Learning activities of the grandmother:* The grandmother (Anica) was an active woman. She attended various sorts of associations, such as the pensioner's association and the association for the disabled.

4.3.6. *The comparison of the learning activities between the parent's and grandparent's generations in FAMILY 3:* Both generations are very active and the town environment offers specific possibilities for joining various groups. The self-initiative of the individual is visible; the individual's activities are not based on the social events prepared by various organisations within the neighbourhood, but on the individual's wishes and desires to do something. In her network the mother has relatives as well as friends and neighbours, which shows the inclusion into the narrower local environment. Relatives offer her emotional support, for she trusts them the most, but she also gives and receives other types of social support in the neighbourhood, which is mainly tied to the closest neighbours. As an active woman the grandmother has apparently transferred her orientation onto her daughter, who is keen on lifelong learning, expanding her interests and personal growth. Even though there are not as many possibilities in the surroundings as mother would wish for, she is constantly searching for new opportunities to learn and she is very independent at this.

## 5. Conclusions

We have identified three typical types of living environments: a village settlement, a settlement of detached houses in the suburbs and a council estate in a town. The village settlement is the most cohesive, which is probably linked to the traditional orientation of this environment – a strong family structure is supported by the extensive activities of the Catholic Church. The learning habits of both generations are strongly influenced by the stereotypes as regards the learning capabilities of the elderly and the influence of the traditional, patriarchal notion of family and community life.

The disintegration of community events in Slovenia is much more noticeable in neighbourhoods in suburban settlements of detached houses. In such neighbourhoods the individual's motivation and self-initiative become important, as does the individual's decision to learn. For their socialisation and learning the lesser motivated adults will use the neighbourhood or its network and the possibilities that are available there, while the higher motivated individuals are more likely to search for sources elsewhere. In such an environment socialising within the community is usually not the catalyst for forming active learning groups, for the existing associations do not represent appropriate cohesive elements. Dragoš and Leskošek claims that due to the loss of community spaces in suburban settlements 'there are less and less connections between people, the possibilities for joint actions are reduced, loneliness and personal dissatisfaction are on the increase' (Dragoš and Leskošek 2003: 48).

The analysis of the learning habits of adults who live on a council estate in a town shows that the inclusion into learning activities is predominantly governed by the interests of the individual. The effects of a group initiative or the local environment are minimal or non-existent. The learning activity of the individual depends on her/his endeavours to find the right learning activity for her/him. Due to the relative loneliness or connections with merely the closest neighbours, their learning activities differ greatly. The responses of the interviewees who live in a town show that by participating in learning activities they not only seek knowledge but often also social contacts and the possibility to spend their leisure time.

Field *et al.* (2000) claim that a strong social network and a high level of trust within it encourage a fast transfer of information and knowledge; at the same time this reduces the need for organised learning. Research in Great Britain has proven that adults, whose leisure time interests are linked to the family, are less likely to be involved in learning activities as those whose interests are not linked to the home and family (Field 2005: 105). To a certain extent this can also be noticed in Slovenia.

It is interesting that similar to Field and Schuller, Strawn discovers that people with a vast social capital (with strong and linked networks) gravitate towards the inclusion into informal, occasional learning that appears in these networks, and they do not seek the possibilities in organised adult education that appears within the community (Strawn 2003: 57). Similar conclusions have been reached in our research. We have observed important differences between village and town environments; in the village environment the interviewees stressed the importance of socialisation, talking and cooperation, with which they fulfil their inner needs. In the town environment people desire to be included into learning activities for the purpose of socialising and contacts. It became clear that

neighbourhoods can be regarded as actively constructed by their members and not merely arising from the local circumstances.

In Slovenia the inclination to participate in the learning process and the actual inclusion of the older adults into various learning activities declines with age. This is proven by qualitative and quantitative data. The interest for learning declines with age regardless of the possibilities offered by a certain environment. We observe that an extremely non-stimulative environment reduces the inclination of adults to learn, but on the other hand it is obvious that an environment that ensures a more diverse learning environment does not always offer enough encouragement for the older adults (third generation) to learn. We have confirmed that the educational offer in all three selected types of living environments in Slovenia is not adjusted to the needs of the older adults, and this must play a factor in their poor learning activities. Respondents' inclination to learn and their willingness to participate in neighbourhood activities is influenced by the characteristics of their social networks. Those with small, closely knit family networks are less involved in organised learning activities in the neighbourhood when compared to respondents with a larger and looser network.

We can conclude that the needs (as regards learning) of the future generations of older adults will be different to the needs of the older adults today. There is an important difference between the learning habits, level of education and inclination to learn between the current generation of older adults and the adults who are about to enter this period. Today's characteristics of older adults can therefore not predict what the older adults will need in the future.

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