

STORY OF THE LIFE SATISFACTION OF A GROUP OF RETIRED DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In this article the story of the life satisfaction of a group of elderly Black South African retired women who had worked as domestic workers is told in different voices. On the basis of previous research I had expected that Black women in a low-status occupation would not have a significant measure of life satisfaction, but I was surprised by their degree of life satisfaction, their sense of meaningfulness, their feelings of achievement, and their pride in themselves and their children. For most of these women their church activities are very important and enjoyable, and the well-being of their children and grandchildren is also very important to them – many are involved with the care of their grandchildren. Most of them live with their children and/or other relatives, and feel, in their contributions to the household and the care of the grandchildren, that they are still useful. In spite of the “triple jeopardy” (age, poverty and ethnicity) that confronts elderly Black people, these women display a strong resilience. The following words describe in essence the feelings of most of them about life and themselves: “My life is very meaningful; I have achieved a lot” – could ageing be more successful than this?

INTRODUCTION

The story of the life satisfaction (and all its concomitant aspects) of a group of thirty retired domestic workers is told here within the story of the research process itself. The stories are told by different “voices”: firstly, the voice of the researcher (that is, me), giving an account of the research process, and also attempting to outline the lives of a group of women who had worked as domestics and whose stories caught my attention and surprised me; secondly, the voices of the research participants – retired (elderly) domestic workers who share their stories about their lives and themselves (including their life satisfaction and problems that they experience); thirdly, the voices of the field workers, who observed their research participants’ environment and homes, and who also interviewed them about their life satisfaction; in the fourth place, the voices of the researchers who had published their findings on these and related topics in books and articles.

LITERATURE SURVEY

My story begins with my studying of the literature on late adulthood. The fact that almost every author mentions the increase in the aged population, not only in Western countries but also in developing countries, convinced me that doing research on old age is important. Apt (1996:1) says for instance: “Africa, like the rest of the world, is growing old. The number of aged residents on the continent is increasing rapidly”. Apt (1996:1) furthermore points out that the social welfare system of Africa, namely the extended family, is at the same time beginning to break down: “... across Africa as a whole, traditional caring systems are breaking down”. This would then probably also pertain to a substantial part of the ageing population of South Africa, which in my opinion renders it essential that the research eyes of the human sciences should look at this phenomenon.

During my study of the relevant literature I found that the importance of researching the aspect of life satisfaction of the elderly was highlighted continuously. For example, Coke and Twaite (1995:ix) said: "In order to plan programs that optimize the use of scarce resources, social policy planners must have an understanding of the factors that predict the satisfaction and well-being of seniors."

But I had to ascertain for myself what the concept of life satisfaction encompassed that made it such an important research topic. It is defined by Ripple, Biehler and Jaquish (1982:529) as "the emotional component of people's attitudes toward their own lives ... a reflection of their feelings about the past, present, and future". McGuinn and Mosher-Ashley (2000:78) see life satisfaction as "a personal assessment of the overall conditions of one's life". I would summarise it as follows: life satisfaction refers to how happy and satisfied one is with one's life. A person's life satisfaction, therefore, involves his/her whole being. People's entire experiential world is coloured by their own feelings about themselves and their life (e.g. whether they see their past life as meaningful, or their present life as still meaningful amidst losses and deterioration). In the course of my studies I came to realise that it was therefore important to determine the factors that would influence elderly persons' experience of themselves as human beings and the meaningfulness of their lives.

Most of the literature I could find on the topic of life satisfaction during late adulthood reported on studies done in America and other developed countries, and the subjects were mostly White (e.g. that of Bergan & McConatha, 2000; Gupta & Korte, 1994; Newsom & Schulz, 1996; Wallace & Bergeman, 1997). Few studies seem to be focused on different cultures (e.g. Dubanoski, Heiby, Kameoka & Wong, 1996; Krause, 1993). There does seem to be a gap in the research done in this field on people of colour, and also as far as cross-cultural research in this regard is concerned – overseas and in South Africa. Coke and Twaite (1995:x) confirmed my conviction when I read how they hoped that their work would "inspire other investigators to examine in greater detail the correlates of life satisfaction among elderly Blacks and among elderly citizens from various ethnic and cultural groups." They referred here to American research, but it is just as valid in respect of the need for cross-cultural research in South Africa today, because, according to Strydom (1994), very little research has been done in South Africa on elderly Black people.

Factors influencing life satisfaction

From the following discussion of research it is clear that there are many different factors that could influence life satisfaction during late adulthood (McGuinn & Mosher-Ashley, 2000).

Most of the research studies focus on one or two personal factors influencing life satisfaction or psychological well-being. The factor of **health** (or the subjective experience of health) was considered in many studies (e.g. Appollonio, Rozzini, Castelletti & Trabucchi, 1998; Bowling, Farquhar & Grundy, 1996; Calasanti, 1996; Gee, 2000; Girzadas, Counte, Glandon & Tancredi, 1993; Koyano, Okamura, Ando, Hasegawa & Asakawa, 1995; Kunzmann, Little & Smith, 2000; Menec & Chipperfield, 1997; Rogers, 1999; Zhang & Yu, 1998).

The **social** factor (social support, including friendships, relationships with family, friends, children and a confidante) was investigated in most of the research articles I studied (to mention just a few: McCamish-Svensson, Samuelsson, Hagberg, Svensson & Dehlin, 1999; McGuinn & Mosher-Ashley, 2000; Nathawat & Rathore, 1996; Newsom & Schulz, 1996; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000).

It also seems that an elderly person's perceived **control** over his/her situation plays an important role (e.g. research by Howell, 1998; Menec and Chipperfield, 1997; Wallace and Bergeman, 1997) – this is related to locus of control (Wallhagen, 1998). **Religiosity** is also an important factor in

elderly persons' life satisfaction or well-being (Bergan and McConatha, 2000; Levin and Chatters, 1998). Other factors considered by some of the research studies are activity level, employment status, income, gender, personal growth, sense of purpose, autonomy, life review and even associations with animals.

Fewer studies (less than the above-mentioned number on personal factors) considered environmental factors; for example, Brown (1995) studied person-environment interaction, Gee (2000) the effect of living arrangements, and Schwirian and Schwirian (1993) neighbouring and residential satisfaction.

When considering the above-mentioned research (and many other studies not mentioned here), it becomes clear that one cannot isolate a single factor or any group of factors that will guarantee life satisfaction, because people's subjective perceptions of their own circumstances will always be characterised by individual differences (Bee, 1996). My conclusion (about the factors influencing life satisfaction in old age), as derived from the literature survey that I did may be summarised in Stuart-Hamilton's (2000:155) words: "... [these] findings suggest that a rich tapestry of factors determine later life satisfaction."

Life satisfaction of the Black elderly

As mentioned above, very few studies have been done on Black elderly persons and their life satisfaction. The few that I did come across left me with the impression that Black elderly people had a lower level of life satisfaction than Whites: Burton, Rushing, Ritter and Rakocy (1993) and Krause (1993) claim that most of the research indicates that Black elderly people have a lower level of life satisfaction or subjective sense of well-being than Whites. One would also expect people from a lower socio-economic class to have a lower measure of life satisfaction (Fried & Mehrotra 1998). Broman (1997:46) found that "the experience of racial discrimination negatively affects life satisfaction for African Americans". This would certainly be true too for Black elderly persons in South Africa, who had been oppressed in the previous dispensation and discriminated against in every respect in society. In a South African study by Ochse (1984), it was duly found that Black women scored lower on life satisfaction than any other subgroup (White males, White females and Black males) in her study.

All these findings left me with a certain expectation that especially Black women would not show much life satisfaction. With this expectation, I then embarked upon a cross-cultural study of the life satisfaction of South African elderly persons.

AIM OF RESEARCH

The overall, initial purpose of the research project was to determine the factors influencing the life satisfaction of the elderly in different ethnic groups in South Africa. In order to investigate these factors quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. In this article I am reporting on a part of the qualitative data – the aim is to tell the story about the life satisfaction of a group of Black, South African, retired domestic workers.

RESEARCH PARADIGM

Initially I coded the qualitative data so that they could be analysed together with the quantitative data. The research participants' responses in the interviews contain such rich, descriptive data that I understood during this coding process what Thomas and Chambers (1989:284) meant when they said that "subjective dimensions, which touch on the core of a person's sense of meaning and self-

definition, may not be accessible to survey-type, structured questions". It made me decide to analyse this data also qualitatively, and to write a story about this group of domestic workers.

As was pointed out above, this is then a report on a part of the qualitative data of the research project.

METHOD

Sampling and gathering of data

The data were collected by field workers who were students at Honours level in Developmental Psychology between 1999 and 2001 – this formed part of their practical assignment. Purposeful (non-random) sampling (as described by Durrheim, 1999; and Babbie, Mouton, Payze, Vorster, Boshoff & Prozesky, 2001) was done, as the field workers had to recruit research participants meeting the following inclusive criteria:

- 60 years or older;
- retired, not following an occupation or not working; and
- first participant selected from the student's own ethnic and language group, and a second and/or third participant selected from an ethnic group other than the student's own group.

The data consisted of 185 hand-written, verbatim accounts of the research participants' responses and narratives.

This article focuses on the qualitative data taken from 30 respondents who had all been domestic workers (and who met the above-mentioned criteria). The field workers used a structured interview with open-ended questions to collect the data and a biographical questionnaire to obtain demographic information about each research participant. (A life satisfaction questionnaire and locus of control scale were also used, but these quantitative data are not reported on in this article.)

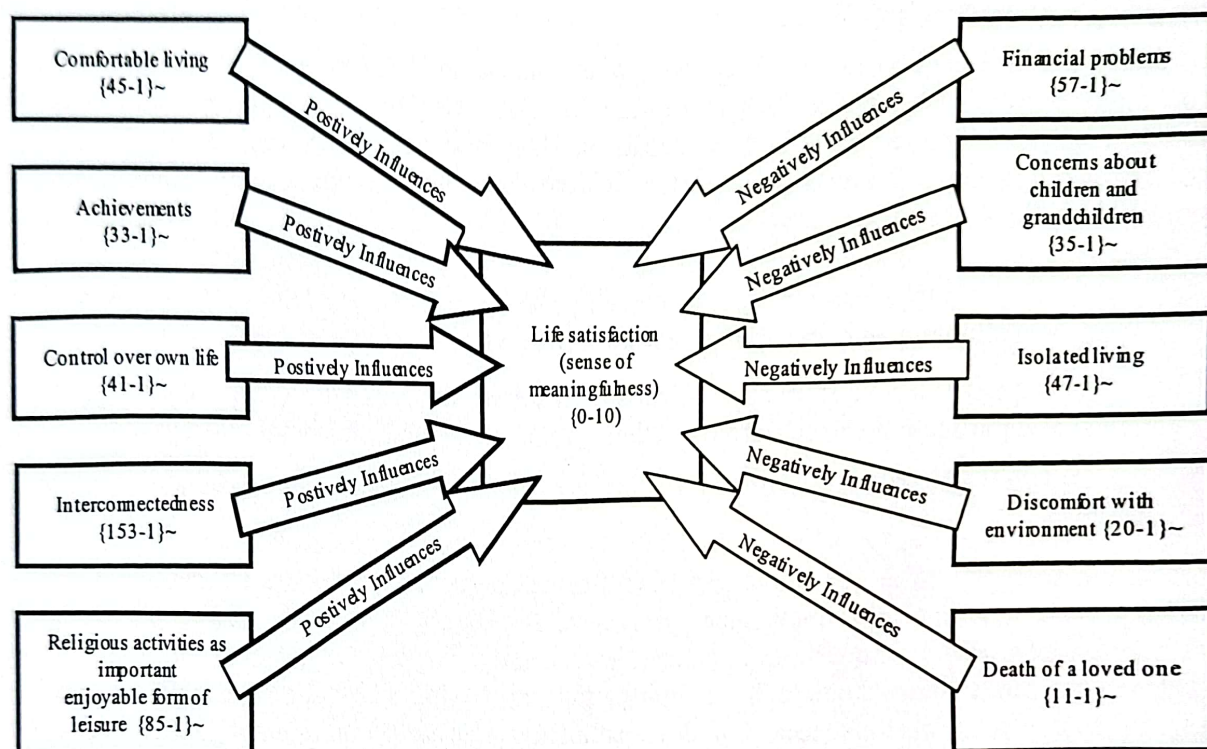
Analysis of qualitative data

The grounded theory method, as described by Babbie *et al.* (2001) and by Strauss and Corbin (1990), was used. There was no shortcut method simply to assign codes. I had to first determine what kinds of responses were given and then group those into themes, so that codes could be assigned. To this end I used the responses and narratives of the research participants in full (as transcribed by the field workers), and repeatedly read through them, as suggested by Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999). This enabled me first to do open coding (i.e. conceptualising and creating categories, and relating them to segments of the text), which I did by hand. Then I used the Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) package, *Atlas.ti for Windows*, to capture the open coding and went on to do the axial coding (making connections between categories and between categories and their subcategories). The process of selective coding, using *Atlas.ti's* theory-building and networking function, then followed. Here the main story line was determined and the central phenomenon identified. Based on this, the factors influencing life satisfaction are represented in Figure 1 and discussed below as part of the conclusion. The idea of this "mind map" is to "tell the story of [my] project visually" (Babbie *et al.* 2001:506).

For the sake of validity the peer review and audit trail (Smaling, 1992) were done by colleagues proficient in qualitative social research methods and working in the same academic department as I do. Attempting to allow my research participants to speak and not distort the picture ("doing justice to the object" – Smaling, 1990:160), these colleagues (who were also involved in the

planning of the research project) checked the concepts and categories; regular discussions were also held with them during the analysis process (as suggested by Smaling, 1990; 1992).

FIGURE 1
FACTORS INFLUENCING LIFE SATISFACTION



FINDINGS

It was found that the majority of the 30 domestic workers feel positive or reasonably positive about their life and themselves – they thus have life satisfaction. I could identify only four persons who regarded their lives as meaningless and who did not feel satisfied with their lives when they looked back over them. The biographical details of the group were illuminating and interesting. I found their stories on how they feel about their lives and themselves very moving, because there were so many “thick” (detailed) descriptions (cf. Durrheim, 1999) of their life satisfaction, the reasons for that, the problems they experienced, the highs and the lows in their lives, etc., that I decided to tell the story of this group of women.

THE STORY OF THE GROUP OF DOMESTIC WORKERS

What follows here is the story of thirty women, as told through the voices of the researcher (me), the women themselves (the passages in inverted commas are their own words), the field workers, as well as several researchers whose findings I studied.

When reading the story, the reader may attempt with me to imagine the experiential world of these people as it becomes clearer from the story. This may be called the “insider perspective” – attempting to view the world through the eyes of the research participants (Babbie *et al.*, 2001:271).

Background

This group of thirty retired, female domestic workers, whose ages vary between 60 and 82, probably worked from the 1960s or 1970s until recently as domestic workers. They thus worked for most of their working lives during the apartheid years in South Africa as people with very few rights in a low-status occupation. They certainly did not receive high wages and most of them probably worked long hours. During the years that they worked, some of them probably stayed in servants' rooms (domestic quarters) on their employers' property, and saw their families only occasionally (many servants in those years went home only once a month). Others, who lived in their own homes in the townships, probably left home in the early hours of the morning (before daybreak) to return only after dark, and probably walked great distances to catch a bus or taxi. The following words of three of these women say it all:

- "I had lots of problems, I struggled to cope with working and bringing up children."
- "The life of a black woman was not easy in the past."
- "My lewe was nie maklik nie – ons het baie gesukkel."

In this group three of the women are Coloured, with Afrikaans as home language, and the rest are all Black, with one of the Black languages as home language (e.g. Sotho, Tswana, Swazi, Zulu or Xhosa). A small number of the women had no formal education and most of them had primary school education. The others (a minority) had attended secondary school. Most of them rate their state of health as reasonably good, good or even excellent. Only a few said their state of health was bad or very bad.

Marital status and sharing a bed

About a third of the women are widows. A number of them who had lost their husbands describe that as a low point in their lives. The others are divorced, estranged from their spouses or had never married. Three of them still live with their husbands, while most of them live with children and/or relatives. A few live alone. Some share their beds with a grandchild or cousin (these women all live in a small room) but in the interviews not one of them indicated that as a problem. The women concerned share a single bed with someone else, while another woman, who lives with her children, shares a large (queen size) double bed with four grandchildren – two pre-school and two primary school children. Sometimes two other school-going children sleep in the same room on a bed made up on the floor.

Having children and losing them

This group of women all had one or more children and all of them also have grandchildren. Approximately one third of them had lost one or more of their children through death. The loss of a child or a grandchild, or the loss of another member of their family, constitutes a major low point for many of them. Three of the women each had only one daughter and had lost her through death and now had no child. Interestingly, each of these three women have two grandchildren, live with one or more family members, and report that they never feel lonely. One widow who had four sons lost all four through death, but she did not voluntarily mention this fact in the interview when asked questions about her problems or low points in her life. She has one daughter left who lives with her and who is a great worry to her, as she suffers from epilepsy. And yet this woman was one of those who described their lives as very meaningful. She described her wedding day as the high point in her life, and it is also clear that she had been happily married – a fact which probably contributed to her life satisfaction. Amongst those who did mention the death of their children as a prominent low point in their life are two women whose sons had been shot. One said that the low

point in her life was when her son was shot dead in the township. The other said "a sad day in my life (was) when my son was shot dead. I still see him in my dreams but I miss him and that makes me cry. I live with the pain every day for the rest of my life and it's hard."

Home and environment

Most of the women feel positive about the place where they live, either because it is their own house where they have been living for a long time, or because they are happy living with their children or relatives. For many of them the good relationship with their neighbours also contributes to their feeling of living comfortably.

Their places of residence vary over the whole spectrum from city centre to townships³, to towns near cities or in the rural areas, to small holdings or farms. Most of them live in their own house and the rest live in a room in the house of family members or in a flat built onto a house or in a high-rise building. Most of them live in townships, where the types of houses vary from shacks to brick and mortar homes, some with water and electricity, others without. A field worker describes one of the shacks as follows: "The research participant lives in a two-roomed dwelling built of mud and corrugated iron. The room that serves as a lounge has a table in the centre with chairs. It is tidy. There is also an old side-board by the wall. On the wall is a wall-clock and a picture of 'The Last Supper'. There is also an inscription that hangs on the wall which reads: 'In this house Jesus reigns'".

Another research participant's house is described by a field worker as "... a house in the so-called Coloured residential area – a low-income suburb ... the house looks fairly run-down from the outside..." but the research participant living here, said: "I feel very at home – it was my mother's place. We have had the same neighbours for years too, my auntie lives next door. My children live nearby, I am not lonely, the family is always popping in. My house is very warm – there is a lot of love here. There are always children here – there is a lot of warmth from them – that makes me happy". This woman's feelings about her house illustrate the point that one's perception of the environment (the subjective or internal environment) is crucial in one's experience of it – which will also influence life satisfaction (Johnson, Cook, Foxall, Kelleher, Kentopp & Mannlein, 1986; Schwirian & Schwirian, 1993; Yoon, 1996). On this aspect Cavanaugh (1997:458), for instance, had this to say: "... it is often the perception of the environment that matters, not necessarily the way things really are".

However, not everyone in the group likes their places of residence; for instance, a Black woman, who lives alone, says: "I do not like this house – it is too small and not very comfortable". Another one, who lives in Hillbrow⁴ with a cousin, says of her living quarters: "I am not happy about it, but what can I do? The place I live in is noisy. It's filthy and dirty – I live here because I am stranded."

As far as their feeling safe in their environment is concerned, most of the women feel safe – probably because they have family members and other people around them, for example: "I feel safe because I am the oldest in my neighbourhood and my neighbours are highly protective of me, they regard me as the mother to them all, they come to me for advice." There are some that feel unsafe because of the high crime rate in their neighbourhood. One participant who lives with

³ In South Africa a township is an outlying suburb consisting mainly of sub-economic housing, originally meant for non-white residents (see *Word Power Dictionary*, 1996).

⁴ Hillbrow is a suburb near the city centre of Johannesburg. It is a cosmopolitan, high-density area with a high crime rate.

relatives in a township responded in the following way when asked whether she felt safe where she lived: "No, too much killing and shooting. At night they chase each other in the streets. It sounds like they are shooting just outside the house."

Importance of religious activities

The women were also asked which activities they enjoyed most. Here religious activities were by far the most enjoyable. The religious activities fulfil their spiritual needs (e.g. "I love reading the Bible. I get great comfort from that" and "... om by die kerk deel te wees – dit het my lewe verander"), but also other needs, as seems evident from two other women's words: "I'm going to church every Sunday. I enjoy praying and talking to the people that come to church. We're singing and talking about the stories in the Bible. We also help people in need. If one member gets sick we're visiting him in hospital and pray for his health"; and "I enjoy going to church because I also meet my friends there."

In the biographical questionnaire they had to rate on a five-point scale how important religion was for them. Nearly all of them indicated number 5 ("very important"), and some indicated number 4 ("fairly important"). Not one of the lower numbers ("not sure", "fairly unimportant" or "of no importance") was chosen. It is thus clear that religion and probably all the concomitant activities, such as singing, socialising and helping others, play a major role in these women's lives. The importance of religious affiliation or religious attendance for life satisfaction is indicated by many researchers, for instance, Mookherjee (1997) and Bergan and McConatha (2000). According to Coke (1992), Chatters and Taylor (1990), Stuart-Hamilton (2000) and Cavanaugh and Blanchard-Fields (2002), religion is extremely important for the African Americans – and this is also very much so for the women in this group. This group of South African Black women is thus very similar to the American Black women as far as the importance of religion in their lives is concerned.

Some of the women also mention religious experiences as high points. An interesting case is that of one of the Black women who told how after her husband's death she had to come to the city to find work. She described that time as one of the low points in her life, but her story is so much about her triumph over circumstances that that time could actually be regarded as a high point in her life:

"The low point of my life was losing my husband when my children were very small. I wasn't working, he was working and looking after the family. When he died, we really hit the bottom and I had to come to Cape Town to look for work (which I did) and kept it for the last 35 years. In that time I discovered myself – I went out and met other people, tried to put my life together, became a regular churchgoer and I believe that God helped me through this difficult time."

Problems experienced

Some of the problems experienced are the following:

- **Financial problems**

Most members of this group of women experience insufficient financial resources as their biggest problem. Also where they had to indicate what made their lives difficult, most of them said a lack of money. Many of them care for their grandchildren, which places an additional financial burden on them, and some of them even help their children financially. One widow said: "My biggest problem is money – I only get a small pension from the government. With that money I sometimes help my children." Another one says her problem is "finances – having to extend my pension

money to the children of my daughter who is not working"; yet another two women say: "The grandchildren and I live on the old-age pension I receive" and "shortage of money makes life difficult. I can buy the basics, but I struggle when I help the children. The government pension is not enough".

- **Problems with regard to children and grandchildren**

Caring for the grandchildren makes life difficult for quite a few of the women, as they apparently have to fill the role of parent. Some of the grandchildren often behave badly: "I find it very difficult looking after my grandson. I find it very difficult to discipline him, and usually when I get home he is playing with his friends in the street and not doing his homework." Some women are worried about the future of their children and grandchildren: "My granddaughter who stays with me wants to go to university and I can't help her"; and "My second biggest problem is my son's future who is always in and out of jobs". Quite a number of them are worried about their children or grandchildren who are unemployed ("When my son cannot find a job, I become very worried and this makes my life very hard"), and who are in financial difficulties or are experiencing other problems, such as illness or an unhappy marriage. Brown, Ferguson-Brown and Canca (1997) also found that a reasonable percentage of the group of Black elderly people that they studied in the Transkei had worries about their children.

Life satisfaction

I will now tell the story of the life satisfaction of this group of women in my own voice and that of other researchers, but especially through the voices of the women themselves.

- **A reasonable to high degree of life satisfaction**

Quite a number of women said that they felt reasonably happy or content, but the majority said that they felt content with their lives, or that they felt good, happy or fine, for instance:

- "I am satisfied with my life."
- "Life is perfect. I am happy at the moment."
- "I feel very happy with my life."

- **Relationships contributing to life satisfaction**

Stevens (1993) and Fisher (1995) independently report that they had found that a sense of usefulness (feeling needed and productive, making a contribution and helping others) is very important for life satisfaction. In the same vein, Emick and Hayslip (1996) refer to the emotional reward and the satisfaction that grandparents feel who had helped to bring up grandchildren, especially if the grandchildren distinguish themselves through their achievements. Furthermore, according to Bee (1996), the marriage and family relationships are a better predictor of life satisfaction than any other factor. Cantor and Brennan (2000) and Featherman (1992) also refer to the contribution that relationships with relatives, friends and neighbours make to a positive quality of life. Whitbourne and Powers (1994) also found that older women who are involved in their family members' lives feel more positive about life than those who are more concerned with their own personal lives. Some of these women confirm the above-mentioned findings:

- "My life is very meaningful – I have many children to look after."
- "My life is still meaningful because I look after my one grandchild, help my children out and cook the meals. It is important to me to feel useful."

- “I am very satisfied as I have a husband, children, grandchildren, a house.”

Except for one research participant (a widow who said that she had no friend or close friend), all of them had a number of friends and most of them also had a close lady friend (confidante), with whom they could discuss anything. Quite a lot of research emphasises the importance of friends for psychological well-being, for instance, Blieszner (1995:181): “Apparently, the availability of long-standing friendships provides comfort and happiness in the late years of life”.

• Achievements

“We can give meaning to our lives ... by the work we do” (Le Roux, 1999:123).

An obvious characteristic among those women who feel content or happy is their feeling proud of themselves and their children for what they have achieved – and that mainly through their work as domestic workers:

- “I feel good about my work that I did. I worked for that family for so many years. I was next to them when they died.”
- “I feel good because I have achieved what I wanted to. I made myself a home, I worked hard and put my children through school and high school – they are professionals. I worked as a domestic worker to achieve this.”
- “I feel satisfied and fulfilled. What I have achieved, I worked for to achieve in life.”

Control over own life

A number of these women do depend on others with regard to things such as repairs in and around the house, and for transport or for shopping, while some are financially dependent on someone else. However, most of the women in this group make their own decisions. They therefore still feel in control of their lives. A few women say that they would ask someone else’s opinion, but that they would still decide for themselves:

- “Ek besluit nog oor alles. Ek is nog gesond genoeg om vir myself te besluit. My kinders respekteer my. Ek hou daarvan om vir myself te besluit. Niemand kan vir my besluit nie.”
- “I decide about my life, I decide when to go to church, where my grandchildren will go to school and also what I will eat at the end of each day.”

DISCUSSION

For this article I focused on the qualitative data of the group of women who worked as domestic assistants. The coding and analysis of the data convinced me once again of the importance of qualitative research, because, as in this study, it gave me more in-depth insights into the participants’ subjective experiences. I was looking for answers to questions such as: Do they have any life satisfaction? What gives meaning to their lives? Are they experiencing problems? How do they feel about themselves as persons? I used certain of the biographical data, their responses in the interviews, and the field workers’ observations, and typed these data into an electronic file, from where I analysed them by means of the grounded theory method, as described by Babbie *et al.* (2001) and by Strauss & Corbin (1990). The richness of the data made me decide to tell the story of the group – the idea was to try and create a picture of this group of domestic workers.

CONCLUSION

The research findings mentioned above under the literature survey indicate that Black people, and especially Black women in South Africa, have a low measure of life satisfaction (see, for instance, what Ochse (1984) found regarding the life satisfaction of Black, South African women). That is why I had expected that retired domestic workers in South Africa who had worked most of their working lives during the apartheid years (as persons with few rights and in a low status job) would not experience a significant measure of life satisfaction. They are also faced with the “triple jeopardy” of age, poverty and ethnicity (as stated by Stuart-Hamilton (2000) regarding elderly persons in America who belong to an ethnic minority group – which would also apply to the domestic workers of this study).

Contrary to my expectations, most of the women in this group of domestic workers indicated that they are satisfied with their lives. The factors influencing their life satisfaction are depicted in the graphic representation (Figure 1). In this representation, life satisfaction (sense of meaningfulness) in the centre block has been linked to ten different codes, depicting various factors influencing the life satisfaction of the women in this group. It was clear that the factors that contribute to their life satisfaction outweigh those that negatively influence it, as illustrated in Figure 1 by the thicker lines joining the positive factors to the main story line, and the thinner lines joining the negative factors to the main story line. In Figure 1 the first number in brackets behind each code is indicative of the number of quotations or segments of text attached to this code; for example, there are 45 quotations or segments of text that were attached to the code of “Comfortable living” and 153 segments of text attached to the code “Interconnectedness”, etc. Most of the women in this group have a feeling of usefulness and a concomitant close interconnectedness with their children, relatives and other people, and this apparently plays an important role in making their lives meaningful (even though they had lost loved ones and despite their concern about the well-being of their children and grandchildren). The environments of some of them are not very comfortable and they feel isolated, but most of them feel positive about their place of residence, because they feel safe and because it is their own home, and also because of the interconnectedness with people in their neighbourhood – this contributes to their feeling of comfortable living and thus also of life satisfaction. When looking back on their lives, they feel proud of their achievements: they had brought up their children well, and had paid for their education on the wages of a domestic worker – some of the children even entered the professions. Although most of the women experience financial problems, these problems apparently do not outweigh the positive influences – they generally add that they are still in control of their lives and that their participation in religious activities affords them great comfort and pleasure. Because of this group’s overriding feeling of meaningfulness and life satisfaction, I would describe their feeling essentially by quoting the following words: “My life is very meaningful – I have achieved a lot”. This is very similar to Barush’s (1997:269) findings in her study of a group of low-income American women: she found that they described themselves not as “old and poor”, but as “fortunate and blessed”.

I just had to tell this story of the group of domestic workers and I have told it through different voices – it gives us a picture of the experience of a few women who generally feel positive about the world around them. I did not intend to generalise about the life satisfaction of the entire population of domestic workers in South Africa, nor about the factors affecting the life satisfaction of retired South African domestic workers.

Several authors refer to the resilience of Black people which enables them to overcome a hostile environment (McKinney, Harel & Williams, 1990). Coke and Twaite (1995:6) say: “elderly Blacks are a highly resilient group who appear to be able to cope with the stresses associated with their disadvantaged status through a variety of strategies”. This would certainly apply to the

women of this study: they did not have an easy life – they did not earn high wages, probably worked long hours, did not see their families often (due to long working hours or because they lived apart); yet they display positive feelings about life and themselves, and thus seem to have this above-mentioned extraordinary capability to overcome their difficult circumstances.

The story of this group of women thus also confirms the basic premise of developmental psychology, namely that development does not stop after adolescence, but that personality growth could still take place in late adulthood: people can adapt to physical deterioration and changes in their environment, and still retain their life satisfaction, in spite of decline, loss, problems and hardship (Lueckenotte, 2000). People who are psychologically mature also accept responsibility for the future outcome of their lives, make decisions actually to do something with their lives and do not blame other people or events when things go wrong (Gerdes, Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998). This group of domestic workers is an example of personal growth in spite of adverse circumstances and they also accepted the responsibility of achieving something in their lives. They are thus also a shining example of people who are ageing successfully, because they see their lives as meaningful and therefore have significant life satisfaction.

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