

# THE MARITAL STATUS AND FAMILY LIFE OF ELDERLY BLIND PEOPLE IN CROATIA

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This paper is a study of the main characteristics of the marital status and family life of old blind people in Croatia, as well as the perception of their position in the family. Another aim is to establish whether segments of the elderly blind population differ significantly in their marital and family status with reference to the following variables: sex, age, place of residence, age at which the person became blind. For this purpose, the study was conducted on a sample of 174 respondents from all parts of Croatia. The sample was selected among the old blind persons who were members of the Croatian Association of the Visually Impaired and had legally defined impairments. At the family level, old blind people are faced with the same problems as the elderly are in general. An important problem for this group is loss of spouse and living alone. Life in marriage appears to be a privilege for older (blind) people. With aging, the number of respondents living in complete families (meaning with spouses and children) is rapidly decreasing. Moving a blind person from his/her domicile has more serious consequences than moving a person who is not blind, as the blind use nonvisual techniques in daily life. Most old blind people by far have positive attitudes towards their families, but in general they are not satisfied with their roles in family decision-making. By one-way variance analysis, it was ascertained that respondents differ most with respect to sex and age. The position of old people has been influenced mostly by changes in family structure. The degree of independence of an old blind person will depend on family relationships and the strength of the "supporting network" between generations. Living apart from their children, however, does not have to mean alienation from their family.

**Key words:** old blind people, marital status, family life

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there have been dramatic changes in demographic structure of many societies. Population aging, the rise of life expectancy, and decreasing fertility rates are all processes that are evident at the world level, particularly in the most developed countries (World Bank, 1994). By 2030, it is assumed that there will be about 1.4 billion people older than 60 in the world. The permanent increase in the number of old people creates great difficulties for both the society and this age group itself. Due to social and economic changes, the immediate social milieu of aged generations has changed to a great degree. Traditional family and community networks, providing old people with security, have nearly been destroyed. On the other hand, because of escalating spending, some formal systems for supporting old people have run into difficulties and are no longer able to provide old people with proper

protection. Studies in the advanced countries have shown that expenditures for old people's basic social schemes are on the average three times higher than expenditures for those of the young (Akrap, 1995:316).

Although Croatia doesn't belong to the world of the advanced countries, it is on its way to reaching them in terms of demographic trends. Figures from the 1991 census indicate that 13.1% of Croatia's inhabitants are older than 65 (Statistički ljetopis, 1993:58). Demographic aging has had important implications for the position of the elderly in our society. In general, their quality of life has been worsening (the decline of material status, as well as the deterioration of the quality of social, health, and other services).

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One can see that the proportion of the blind, or generally persons with visual impairments, among the population of the elderly is also increasing. Though the elderly make up a considerable share of the blind, the great majority of the studies in this area have referred to children and adults. In fact, by the mid-1960s very little attention in the world was paid to old blind people. Yet a few decades ago, statisticians in some countries predicted a dramatic increase in the number of old people with serious visual impairments (Lowman, Kirchner, 1979). In the early 1980s in the United States, there were about 5 million persons aged of 55 or over who were blind or seriously visually impaired. This means that one out of every eight persons aged 55 or over had serious visual impairments (related to different difficulties in daily life). The older the age group is, the greater the number of blind persons that group has. Thus, in USA, every one out of four persons aged 85 or over has serious visual impairments. While in 1977 Americans with visual impairments made up 25% of the persons aged 85 or over, this percentage will amount to 36% in 2000 (Jacobs, 1984:155). Similar trends are also present in other countries. In the United Kingdom, 68% of the total number of persons with visual impairments are aged 75 or over; in other words, every one out of five persons over the age of 75 is visually impaired. Visual impairments are usual among the elderly because of illnesses related to the process of aging. Perhaps those who lose their sight at an older age represent a distinctive group (with specific problems).

Croatia has noted an increase in old blind people too (Pinoza-Kukurin, 1995). But so far there have been no studies dealing with the elderly blind. This category of the elderly is not only faced with the problems of adjustment to a new style of life because of leaving their jobs, but also with the additional difficulties of functioning caused by loss of sight. This refers in particular to people who lose their sight gradually, as

they grow older, because it is very important for them to develop nonvisual techniques of functioning in order to maintain independence in daily life. Moreover, a person losing sight in old age needs to adapt to a new reality - but not alone, for anyone he or she lives with must meet this requirement as well. It is well known that there are many stereotypes and "myths" concerning both old age and blindness.

We are most interested in the family life of old blind people. To what degree does family life of old blind people look like that of the elderly who are not blind? It might be assumed that changes in family structures and forms have similarly influenced both groups. (Here, it should be reiterated that there has been very little research that examines the problems of old blind people in relation to their family. There are references dealing with the family dynamics of the elderly, but not specifically related to the blindness problem.) The family is a system in which we live, change, and die. All generations get "benefits" from family relationships. These benefits provide support in times of trouble, strengthen inter-temporal ties, and help people to form their own perspectives about life and death. In particular, the frail elderly are dependent on the family because it gives them a feeling of belonging and connection with society. Family is the key factor even for old people who are without impairments and have adapted successfully to demanding changes, social roles, relationships, and emotional requirements. The problems of old age have had serious consequences on the family and the whole kin network. Self-esteem is very important for assuming roles, and family members are very important in boosting or declining one's self-esteem. Thus, in the case of loss of sight, if the other members of the family understand blindness, it can promote the independence of the older person and help maintain the cohesion of the family unit. Consequently, changes in the family have had far-reaching effects on old (blind) people.

In modern societies, there have been deep changes in the structures and forms of family life (Puljiz, 1995; Kregar, 1994). From the point of view of the elderly, the most important change is the shift from the extended family to the nuclear family. The extended family (comprising three and more generations) and other traditional forms of kin networks, which provided support for old people, have been weakening. In the extended family, people recognized the priority of old age and were prepared to sacrifice individuality and independence in order to gain security and warmth in the community (Kregar, 1994:220). Care for the elderly was formerly considered a holy duty. In the early decades of this century, many authors have pointed out, the majority of old people were heads of household, not dependants, in the houses of their sons or grandchildren. Children used to live together with their older parents. Thus, in 1900, 42% of the married old people in the USA lived in the same household with one or more of their unmarried children, but in 1970 only 10% lived with children. The number of old people living alone or only with their spouses has risen from 20% in 1900 to 75% in 1975 (Eyde, Rich, 1983:16). There is a tendency for old people (single or married) to live in their own household. In the late 1970s in the USA one in seven men aged 65 and over lived alone, whereas among women the ratio was nearly one-third (Eyde, Rich, 1983:16). In Germany, only 20% of elderly people live with younger relatives. A large number of widows and widowers is characteristic of old age. At the age of 65 and over, women are three times more likely than men to be widowed. As a consequence, women are more often subjected to living alone than men. In 1987, 15.6% of American men aged 65 and over lived alone, but as much as 40.9% of women at this age lived alone (Neubeck, 1991:319). The process of the rising number of old people living alone is called "singularization" by some authors (Tokarski, 1993). Generations live alone; the members of each

generation tend to be independent from the other generations. Family life is taking place "at a distance". There is "intimacy at a distance", which some authors understand as a euphemism for the social alienation of old people in contemporary societies. However, there are other authors who do not idealize the extended family, considering the truth to be more complex (Jones, Tepperman, Wilson, 1995).

The aim of this paper is to discuss characteristics of the marital status and family life of old blind people, as well as the perception of social and family status at the present time. Additional intention of the paper is to identify whether the segments of the elderly blind population differ significantly in marital and family status, focussing on the following variables: sex, age, place of residence, and time when the person became blind.

## **METHODS**

The sample was consisted of 174 respondents who were selected from the population of the elderly blind members of the Croatian Association of the Visually Impaired. The respondents were at the age of 55 and over and had legally defined visual impairments. The sample is geographically representative, meaning that the subsamples for Croatian counties were also selected at random. The number of respondents in the sample is about 5% of the fifty-five-year and older population registered members of the Croatian Association of the Visually Impaired.

As regards the sexual composition of the sample, the women numbered 88 and the men 96. There were 65 respondents aged 55-64, 55 respondents aged 65-74, and 54 respondents aged 75 and over. 114 respondents have been blind since birth or went blind before the age of 55, while 57 respondents went blind after that age.

The low limit of old age was set at 55, although this limit in demographic terms is usually 60 or 65. We accepted the limit of 55, taking into consideration that old blind

people retire earlier than other people do and to compare our results with studies using this age limit.

A special questionnaire was constructed and field research was conducted in the summer of 1995.

In addition to descriptive statistical indicators, the differences between respondents' groups in relation to specific variables were examined by one-way variance analysis (SPSS program). Differences were considered significant if probability was  $p \leq 0.5$ .

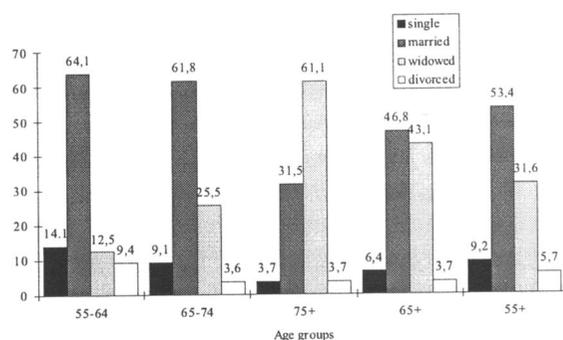
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Marital status and family life

It is evident from the data on marital status that with aging the number of married persons is decreasing (chart 1). Less than 50% of old blind people aged 65 and over are couples. The number of widowed people is also larger in older age groups. At age 75 and over, the number of widowed persons is nearly twice as many as the number of married persons. As the divorce rate after 65 remains low and constant, it is clear that the rise of old people not living in marriage is a consequence of the higher mortality rate of spouses. The number of those who had never married decreased, which could be a result of the different life expectancy between those who have and haven't lived in marriage. Therefore, the specific marital status of old age groups is primarily caused by the biological aging process. Marriage is very important for people in old age. It has three important functions: it provides old people with a feeling of intimacy, interdependence, and belonging (Gilford, 1994). Old (blind) people living in marriage represent, so to speak, a privileged part of the aged population. Marriage is rare in old age, and remarriages of divorced or widowed people are rare as well. This is why the loss of one's spouse is much harder for the elderly than for young and adult people. It has been estimated that in the USA old persons make up about 1% of all brides and about 2% of all bridegrooms (Gilford, 1994:149). Living

in marriage gives old people emotional support, greater integration in social networks and often better material and social status. Older persons living in marriages have suffered less from personal and social breakdowns than divorced and widowed people. Marriage is a very desirable status in old age (more desirable than among younger age groups), and if it is a "happy marriage", then old people find it one of the most important aspects of life (Gilford, 1994). Note that the data about marital status of old blind people aged 65 and over do not differ substantially from the data relating to the old age population (Defilipis, Havelka, 1984; Neubeck, 1994).

Chart 1. Marital Status by Age Group (%)



In addition to marital status, another significant question for old blind people is that of who lives with them in the same household (if they live in their own homes). Other members of the family (primarily children) are particularly important in daily functioning of not only those old people who have visual impairments, but also those who have chronic illness, which can restrain their physical movement. They can hardly get out of the house without help or do common jobs like shopping, food preparing, house cleaning, and like. The more dependent old people are, the more they need relationships with younger members of the family. "Nuclearization of the family" does not give old (blind) people the necessary security; it might even be one cause for their institutionalization. A number of authors think that it is best for old people to be placed in homes or similar institutions where

they would get specific aid. However, the vast majority of old people want to stay in their own houses. Moving to a new place is disturbing to old people, and particularly to blind persons. Older blind people know way around their own house and surrounding. Moreover, they have the freedom to arrange objects as they please. Nevertheless, the modern style of life often gives rise to the institutionalization of the elderly. Yet in the 80s, the United Nations suggested that the family should be "qualified" to care for the elderly. In that sense, the following measures were pointed out: strengthening the economic status of family, not separating the elderly from children and grandchildren, lessening the burden younger family members have in caring for old people (Izazovi starosti, 1984). Table 1 shows what life arrangements are characteristic of old blind people.

A few trends could be observed in the forms of households in which old blind people live. With aging, the number of respondents living in "complete families" (including spouses and children, and maybe grandchildren.) is rapidly decreasing. At age 75 and over the number of these is less than 10%. On the other hand, one can see that the number of old blind people living with children and without a spouse is rising. At age 65 and over, 31% of the respondents live with their children (both with and without spouse). Although this is not perhaps satisfactory, it should be said that in most developed countries the number of persons aged 65 or over living with children

or family ranges from 7-16% (World Bank, 1994:64). The number of the respondents living only with spouse is the largest among 65-74 age group, and then significantly decreases, probably because of the growing mortality rate of spouses. However, the concerning trend is that the number of blind people living alone constantly rises with age. When we add the category of those living alone to that of those living only with their spouses, then it turns out that more than 54% of respondents aged 65 and over are in these two categories. In other words, in the subsample of respondents aged over 65, 66% of the respondents live alone or only with one other person, while the remainder lives with two or more persons. The percentage of old blind people aged over 65 and living alone is a little less than the percentage of the elderly living alone in the most developed countries (30-40%). Nevertheless, a significant number of persons with visual impairments live alone. This category of old blind people has mostly undergone social isolation and is more often faced with poverty and problems in providing subsistence.

Of the total respondents living alone (aged 55 and over), more than 54% have lived in this way for more than 11 years, and 37.1% for more than 21 years. A profile of blind old people living alone is as follows: women in widowhood status are overrepresented, all the age groups are equally represented, the majority have lived alone more than 10 years, the great majority live in big or small urban communities, and 2/3 went blind before

Table 1. Living Arrangements of Old Blind People (%)

Lives with:	Age				
	55-64	65-74	75+	65+	55+
only spouse	26.2	41.9	20.4	31.2	29.3
spouse and children	38.5	20.0	9.3	15.6	24.1
children (spouse not present)	7.7	9.1	24.1	15.6	12.6
relatives	4.6	3.6	3.7	3.7	4.0
other persons	6.2	3.6	14.8	9.2	8.0
spouse and relatives/ children and relatives	1.5	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.7
alone	15.4	20.0	25.9	22.9	20.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

reaching 55. In order to live alone, an older blind person has to gain independence and autonomy, for which time is needed. Not surprisingly, only 11.4% of old blind people who live alone reside in rural communities. This indicates that in rural communities the extended family has been still preserved, and wider kin networks have had an important role in supporting the elderly.

Why do such a large number of old blind people live alone? Of the total respondents living alone (35), 42.9% mention "some other reasons". Then, 34.3% say that they live alone according to their own wish or their wish in agreement with their children (although there was a room in their children's house), 8.6% live alone because their children moved to another place, 2.9% declare there was a room in their children's house but their children wanted to live apart, while 11.4% say there was no room in their children's house (cf. Živković, 1973:119). The problem of living alone is a result of objective circumstances, partly. If the single respondents are added to those whose children moved to another place and to those not having a room in children's flat, then it turns out that about 40% of the respondents live alone because of some objective circumstances. Notwithstanding, living alone does not always have to mean isolation (Tournier, 1980:107). An international study showed that old people were the least alone in Denmark (in relation to Great Britain, the USA, and Poland), although in this country only 18% of respondents lived with their children, because their contacts with children were more frequent or they did not live far from their children (Nenadović, 1988:99).

In general, very few of old blind people live in big families. While the average family in Croatia has 3.1 members (Kregar, 1994:221), the average family of an elderly blind person has 1.8 members. Of the total respondents, 2.8% live in households with 6 or more members, and only 16% live in households with 4 or more members.

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Old people have often been described as a homogeneous demographic group. Be-

cause of this, many variations in the old age population are not taken into consideration. The experiences of aging are not the same for all the elderly. Undoubtedly, the "life chances" of the elderly depend on different demographic and social factors. Do segments of elderly blind population differ in terms of marital status and family life? For this purpose, a one-way variance analysis was applied. It is apparent from Table 2 that there are significant differences between the sexes in terms of marital status and the following family arrangements: whether the respondent lives only with spouse, with spouse and children, or alone. There are many more married men than married women, and widows than widowers. Above the age of 65, there are three times more married men than married women, and three times more widows than widowers. In other words, married men make up 69.1% of the population older than 65; married women, 24.1%. These figures for widows and widowers are 64.8% and 21.8%. These differences are a consequence of the fact that women live longer than men. As regards marriages, older men are in a better situation because they have a much larger "marriage market" from which to choose a spouse. At this point it should also be mentioned that there is a tendency for men to marry persons younger than they are. Older men are several times more likely to remarry than older women. In our study, there are not data about the tendency of older men and women to remarry.

Also, older blind women live less often with spouse or spouse and children than their counterparts. On the contrary, blind women often live alone. Variations in life expectancy are related to the general mortality rate of men. Here we are dealing with a paradox. It is widely accepted the assumption that women are generally in a worse social position than men (Hess, 1994). Their rare privilege, to live longer than men, sometimes "works" against them. As women survive their spouses, they are more likely to suffer from a feeling of loneliness

Table 2. Differences in Marital Status and Family Life, by Sex

Variables	$X_M$	$X_F$	F-test	p
Marital status	2.17	2.53	11.22	.00*
Number of persons he/she is living with	1.98	1.54	3.13	.06
Lives only with spouse	1.44	1.17	15.50	.00*
Lives with spouse and children	1.31	1.15	6.61	.01*
Lives with relatives	1.03	1.09	2.35	.10
Lives with other persons	1.05	1.11	1.92	.14
Lives alone	1.12	1.30	8.88	.00*
How long he/she has lived alone	4.66	4.38	2.75	.08

Table 3. Differences in Marital Status and Family Life, by Age Group

Variables	$X_{(55-64)}$	$X_{(65-74)}$	$X_{(75+)}$	F-test	p
Marital status	2.17	2.24	2.65	7.68	.00*
Number of persons he/she is living with	1.98	1.62	1.63	1.01	.36
Lives only with spouse	1.27	1.47	1.22	4.76	.01*
Lives with spouse and children	1.39	1.18	1.09	8.51	.00*
Lives with relatives	1.06	1.05	1.06	0.02	.98
Lives with other persons	1.08	1.06	1.04	2.55	.08
Lives alone	1.16	1.20	1.26	0.96	.38
How long he/she has lived alone	4.64	4.49	4.43	0.60	.54

and social isolation. It turns out that the loneliness problem has proved to be primarily a problem of old women. Older blind women are not deprived of this "privilege" of living longer and being alone.

Particular age groups appear to differ significantly in terms of marital status and whether they live with spouse or spouse and children (table 3). The means show that the most significant differences are between respondents in the 55-64 age group and those in the 75+ age group in terms of marital status and whether the respondents live with children and spouses. The younger the age group is, the more married individuals it has. Consequently, the largest number of widows and widowers is in the oldest age group. Similarly, the "oldest old" differ significantly from the "middle old" (65-74) in marital status. These data in part confirm the thesis that a person's 65th and 75th years are turning points in his/her life, when changes occur in one's lifestyle and marital and family patterns.

It is apparent from Table 4 that place of residence is also a determining factor for the elderly blind in terms of marital status, frequency, and how long they lived alone. Surprisingly, old blind people in rural and urban communities differed significantly in terms of marital status. Subsequent analysis indicates that this difference was produced by an unequal male/female ratio of the respondents from rural and urban communities in the sample. While women make up 57% of the respondents living in urban communities, the number of women from rural communities is slightly more than 22%. Because the number of men is a few times greater than the number of women, there is a high percentage married individuals among the respondents from rural communities.

Furthermore, the variance analysis confirmed the assumption that respondents from urban communities live alone more frequently and longer than those from rural communities do. This is also influenced by sex. When comparing men from rural co-

mmunities and men from urban communities and comparing women from rural communities and urban communities, we see that it is less important for men whether they live in a rural or urban community ( $F=1.42$ ;  $p\leq 0.20$ ). Though the difference is not significant, women from urban communities are more likely to live alone than women from rural communities ( $F=3.11$ ;  $p\leq 0.07$ ). In rural communities, the extended family has been maintained, so neighbours and relatives are expected to help the elderly when they have no children or when their children reside in another place. To leave an old person in loneliness and isolation is a matter of conscience for the whole rural community. In an urban community, kin networks tend to be destroyed, and young people prefer to live independently, out of their parents' house.

As regards the time of loss of sight, respondents differ significantly in relation to marital status and whether they live with their spouses and children (Table 5). Those who went blind before age 55 have better marital and family status than those who went blind after

age 55. This means that those who went blind before 55 are more likely to be married and living with their spouses and children. This difference results from the fact that respondents who went blind after age 55 are older as a group, which implies as a rule that their marital and family status is worse. While the average age of the respondents who went blind before 55 is 66.5 years, that of the respondents who went blind after 55 is 77.1 years.

Respondents are most differentiated by variables of sex and age regarding their marital and family status. Although these variables are universal factors in status differentiation, they appear to be particularly important in the late years of life. Therefore, age and sex continue to be crucial variables in the explication of old blind people's marital and family status.

### The perception of (one's own) position in the family

First, we wanted to examine what old blind people think about their families. For this

Table 4. Differences in Marital Status and Family Life, by Place of Residence

Variables	$X_u$	$X_r$	F-test	p
Marital status	2.41	2.17	4.23	.03*
Number of persons he/she is living with	1.66	2.04	1.98	.13
Lives only with spouse	1.28	1.40	2.27	.11
Lives with spouse and children	1.22	1.26	0.34	.55
Lives with relatives	1.06	1.06	0.00	.99
Lives with other persons	1.07	1.09	0.20	.69
Lives alone	1.26	1.08	7.74	.00*
How long he/she has lived alone	4.42	4.77	3.91	.04*

Table 5. Differences in Marital Status and Family Life, by Time of Loss of Sight

Variables	$X_{(-55)}$	$X_{(55+)}$	F-test	p
Marital status	2.25	2.53	5.79	.01*
Number of persons he/she is living with	1.85	1.67	0.48	.46
Lives only with spouse	1.28	1.35	0.88	.31
Lives with spouse and children	1.31	1.11	8.82	.00*
Lives with relatives	1.06	1.05	0.05	.94
Lives with other persons	1.10	1.05	0.97	.29
Lives alone	1.20	1.21	0.02	.99
How long he/she has lived alone	4.48	4.60	0.41	.50

Table 6. Attitudes towards Own Family

Statements	I agree completely (%)	I disagree completely (%)	Mean
Members of my family take care of each other	58.6	2.9	1.57
I think my family is brilliant	37.9	8.6	1.92
I can rely on my family	59.8	8.6	1.71
Members of my family get along	58.6	3.4	1.58
I am proud of my family	67.8	2.9	1.44
My family is the basis of my security	54.6	7.5	1.72

Table 7. Attitudes towards the Elderly (%)

The elderly were more respected during my youth than today	80.3
The elderly are respected as much today as they were in the past	19.7
The elderly are more respected today than during my youth	0.0
Total	100.0

purpose, we applied a battery of six simple statements. The degree of acceptance for each statement was assessed by a scale consisting of four possible answers: 1) "I completely agree", 2) "I mostly agree", 3) "I mostly disagree", and 4) "I completely disagree". In Table 6, the data relating only to extreme answers were shown ("I completely agree", "I completely disagree"). We consider that they best reflect the acceptance of statements. In addition, the mean of acceptance for each statement is also shown in tables.

It is evident that the respondents agree with all the statements, except one. If we sum the categories "I mostly agree" and "I completely agree", then 77-90% of respondents have a positive opinion of their families. Therefore, we can conclude that the great majority of old blind people are more or less satisfied with their family members; on the other hand, more than 20% of respondents doubt, partly or completely, in the support of their families, as well as in family-based security. These (positive) opinions of their own families could be a product of past and present experiences, as well as future projections. The members of one's own family arouse pleasant memories and intense emotions, even if family relationships could be better. If an older person is not satisfied now with

family members, however, he or she expects to be able to turn to other family members. Elderly blind people do not differ in their opinions of their family either in relation to age, sex, and place of residence, or in relation to other sociodemographic characteristics. Nevertheless, when analysing opinions about the position of the elderly in the family in general, the results are substantially different. Respondents in our sample find that the social and family status of the elderly was much better in the past.

Our data indicate that no respondent thinks old people are respected more at the present than in the past. Do these attitudes reflect an objective position of the elderly in past and today? Often, many authors argue that old people are in general turned to the past, and the young to the present. Some authors ask whether a tendency towards "showing the past in a good light" gives rise to a misunderstanding of the present (Martinčević-Ljumanović, 1985:295). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why old people prefer the past, whatever the present is like. Certainly, these attitudes towards the elderly are caused by a process that could be named as the "degradation" of old age. Many respondents spent their youth before World War II, when the patriarchal family system dominated. This means that they spent their youth and most

**Table 8.** *Perception of Old People's Position in the Family*

Statements	I agree completely (%)	I disagree completely (%)	Mean
Old people should participate more in family decision-making	43.9	1.7	1.79
Old people's opinions should be respected more by other members of family	44.8	0.0	1.71
It is most important for the elderly to live together with children and grandchildren	47.1	9.8	1.88
I would like to contact members of my family more frequently	47.7	6.9	1.81
Society should care more for the elderly	74.1	0.0	1.29
Today, the young don't understand the elderly at all	36.8	5.2	1.91

of their adult years feeling great reverence for the elderly. However, when they themselves became old, they were considered by others to be less worthy.

It is not surprising that respondents like to be involved more in many areas of family life. Some needs and wishes of the elderly relating to family life were analysed by the respondents' reactions to six statements. The degree of acceptance for each statement was measured by the scale consisting of the mentioned four answers. Again, only the extreme answers and means are presented in Table 8.

We can see that the respondents approve of all the statements relating directly to family (the percentages range from 44-48%). The percentage of those who agree that younger family members do not understand the elderly at all is slightly less. However, very high percentages of respondents agree that the society must more care for the elderly. If we take both those who agree completely and those who mostly agree with this statement, then it is approved by 96% of the respondents. This could be interpreted in several ways. Probably, the elderly feel that the society should care, first of all, for their material status because many of them live hard due to low pensions or other social transfers (disability benefits and the like). At the same time, the provision of adequate health and other services is not adequate. Some old people need a specific environment to be able to reach a higher degree of independence in daily life. On the

other hand, more extensive care could mean social support for the family to cope successfully with the problems of its elderly and blind members. Of course, old people are aware of the difficulties their descendants face in attempting to gain proper housing and material status.

In general, old blind people want to participate more in family life, notably in decision-making process. Additionally, they want their opinions to be respected to a greater degree. This means that old people like to actively contribute to the family well-being, they dislike to be barely passive members. Certainly, this opinion of old people is a result of the attitude that their knowledge and experiences have not been exploited enough, and they refuse to accept that their position is only based on past status or that they represent an "additional burden" for family and society. Some studies that have dealt with old blind people (in particular with those losing their sight at an older age) indicate that they have positive perspectives about life and their personal situation (Jacobs, 1984). Respecting old people's opinions in family life undoubtedly contributes to their self-esteem, upon which it depends how successfully they fulfil their family roles.

When analysing the means and percentages of those completely disagreeing with the statements, one can conclude that the question of understanding between the elderly and the young is perceived as a

Table 9. Frequency of Contact with Children (%)

Every day	Once or twice a week	2-3 times a month	Once in a few months	Once a year	Not at all	Total
51.7	22.1	9.4	6.7	2.7	7.4	100.00*

\* Twenty-five respondents who did not have children are excluded from this sample

problem, but not as the biggest one. Moreover, a share of respondents do not think that living with children and grandchildren is the only satisfying way of living for the elderly. However, those who have been more often in contact with their children are ready to accept such a view. Clearly, a number of respondents think that old people are able to lead quality lives by residing separately, but having good relationships with their children. Though many of the respondents like to contact family members more frequently, the great majority are still not isolated from their own family. This illustrates the data on the frequency of contact children (Table 9). Our research shows that very few old blind people are isolated from their families.

Data on how segments of the old blind population differ in perceiving the family position of the elderly in general can be found in Tables 10-13. The general conclusion is that different segments perceive similarly the family position of the elderly, which means there is a high degree of homogeneity in this respect.

The sexes differ significantly in their statements about old people's participating in decision-making and the family's respect for their opinions. Men accentuate more resolutely an attitude that the elderly should have a more prominent role in the family. The sociocultural features of the sexes could probably explain this difference between men and women. First of all, it is well known that women are less inclined to take extreme attitudes. Nonetheless, what is more important here is that these women were brought up and spent most of their lives in a patriarchal system, where men made the important decisions. Although old age had a high reputation, making decisions about crucial family problems was reserved

for older men, and only rarely for older women.

Age does not significantly differentiate the respondents in terms of the statements. All the three age groups within the old blind population see the family position of the elderly in a similar way.

Place of residence has an influence on the respondents' attitudes about the value of living together with one's children and grandchildren. Respondents from urban communities find living with one's descendants less important. This attitude among town and city residents is a result of their real experience. As many of them do not live with their own children, they estimate that such a way of life can be satisfying for older persons, particularly if they have good relationships with their children. Also, older people from towns and cities are aware that housing problems are much more frequent in urban communities than in rural ones. Even when urban dwellers have a house, they often have inappropriate housing space. Furthermore, the aspiration to gain independent housing is much more prevalent among the young urban population, which recognizes an urban style of life and an urban value system. Older people from towns and cities accept at least partly this aspiration of their children.

Age of loss of sight also differentiates the respondents in relation to the statements about participation in family decision-making and social caring for the elderly. Respondents who lost their sight before age 55 more frequently agree completely with the statements that old people should participate more in family decision-making and that the society should care more for the elderly. Specific life circumstances are probably the reasons why respondents who lost their sight after age 55 agree less

completely with the given statements. Basically, it is worth stressing that these persons did not face the problem of blindness earlier than older age. While respondents who lost their sight at a younger age have strengthened attitudes towards blindness and promoted nonvisual techniques of functioning, those who lost their sight at older age have only recently been faced by all of that. In order to accommodate to this new reality, they and their family members need to take their time.

They may be overcome with a feeling of insecurity or of not being able to function independently. People who became blind earlier in their life are, as a rule, aware that a blind person can be an independent and useful member of the family. The problem lies in the fact that respondents who have lost their sight after age 55 face both the blindness problem and the aging process, which itself requires changes in lifestyle. Their stronger feeling of insecurity and perhaps apathy (caused by their loss of sight)

Table 10. Differences in Perception of Family Position, by Sex

Statements	$X_M$	$X_F$	F-test	p
Old people should participate more in family decision-making	1.66	1.91	4.16	.03*
Old people's opinions should be respected more by other members of family	1.60	1.84	4.70	.03*
It is most important for the elderly to live together with children and grandchildren	1.75	2.01	2.98	.07
I would like to contact members of my family more frequently	1.76	1.89	0.77	.34
Society should care more for the elderly	1.27	1.31	0.24	.63
Today, the young don't understand the elderly at all	1.96	1.84	0.81	.33

Table 11. Differences in Perception of Family Position, by Age

Statements	$X_{(55-64)}$	$X_{(65-74)}$	$X_{(75+)}$	F-omjer	p
Old people should participate more in family decision-making	1.75	1.70	1.89	0.77	.46
Old people's opinions should be respected more by other members of family	1.69	1.59	1.85	1.76	.17
It is most important for the elderly to live together with children and grandchildren	1.94	2.04	1.63	2.50	.09
I would like to contact members of my family more frequently	1.88	1.83	1.72	0.40	.67
Society should care more for the elderly	1.19	1.31	1.41	2.52	.08
Today, the young don't understand the elderly at all	1.94	1.91	1.87	0.09	.92

Table 12. Differences in Perception of Family Position, by Place of Residence

Statements	$X_u$	$X_r$	F-test	p
Old people should participate more in family decision-making	1.78	1.79	0.02	.99
Old people's opinions should be respected more by other members of family	1.74	1.64	0.69	.37
It is most important for the elderly to live together with children and grandchildren	1.98	1.64	4.18	.03*
I would like to contact members of my family more frequently	1.90	1.62	3.24	.06
Society should care more for the elderly	1.30	1.28	0.04	.98
Today, the young don't understand the elderly at all	1.91	1.89	0.02	.99

Table 13. Differences in Perception of Family Position, by Time of Loss of Sight

Statements	$X_{(-55)}$	$X_{(55+)}$	F-omjer	p
Old people should participate more in family decision-making	1.69	1.98	4.92	.02*
Old people's opinions should be respected more by other members of family	1.67	1.80	1.31	.22
It is most important for the elderly to live together with children and grandchildren	1.95	1.75	1.46	.19
I would like to contact members of my family more frequently	1.78	1.88	0.37	.53
Society should care more for the elderly	1.24	1.41	3.96	.04*
Today, the young don't understand the elderly at all	1.89	1.96	0.31	.58

is likely to influence those who lost their sight after age 55 to think about how little they can help in decision-making. That is perhaps why they are not so firm in demanding that the society care more for the elderly.

## CONCLUSION

The family life of older (blind) people is considerably a consequence of changes that have taken place in family structures and forms. The domination of the nuclear family has given rise to an idea that the living problems of the elderly could be resolved by their institutionalization. Nevertheless, in our country, as well as abroad, a majority of old (blind) people live in their own homes, but not necessarily with their families. Though living conditions in institutions are now much better than in the past (Moody, 1994; Mikšaj-Todorović et al., 1995), however, it is optimal for old people to live with their families or at least (which is often case) near them. As they must use nonvisual techniques in daily life, it is important to continue living in an environment they know well (and first of all, this means their own home) and to have the freedom to arrange their space as they please. Leaving a well-known physical environment is an additional problem for a blind person.

From the family aspect, the loss of one's spouse and living alone are significant problems for old (blind) people. The number of married old people decreases with age. For the elderly, living in marriage is a kind of privilege. At the same time, the number

of those living with their spouses and children drops with age. Only one out of ten blind persons aged 75 or over lives with their spouse and children. Living alone is also an important problem because more than 1/5 of the blind people older than 65 live alone.

Elderly women are in a less fortunate position than men. Blind older women share the fortune of women in general; in other words, older women are more rarely in marriages and are more often forced to live alone than their male counterparts. Subsequently, the problems of elderly blind persons are especially pertinent as problems of old blind women.

Older blind persons for the most part have very positive attitudes towards their own families, but they are not satisfied with role of the elderly in family decision-making. They have an optimistic view of their knowledge and abilities and would like to play a more active role in family life.

An older blind person is often said to be helpless, passive, unhappy, and substantially dependent on others. But older blind people can also be independent in their daily life, and a degree of their independence is related to various elements, among which family situation and climate are essential. It is very important to influence other family members to be aware of how common the loss of sight in old age is. Moreover, it is necessary to develop "mutual support networks" between family members belonging to different generations. These networks are of importance to a strong family because they promote independence in life. For every family system, it is beneficiary for

its members to be independent, because that strengthens both the family as a whole and each individual member (in this case, the old blind person). With the help and support of other family members, blind and visually impaired persons can be independent; they can do some jobs or have hobbies.

There is a range of subjective and objective reasons why old blind people do not

live with children and grandchildren. However, such a way of life does not have to mean alienation from the family; sometimes it can have advantages, particularly in cases where old blind persons live in the vicinity of their children, have frequent contact with them, and have good housing and material status. Thus, old blind persons can get help and be involved in the processes of family life.

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