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5 Working Life, Sustainable Health and Retirement for Women. A Qualitative Analysis from a Longitudinal Study

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This chapter begins with some questions to women in general. How do they perceive life at retirement? What has influenced their life outcome? How are different life course events distributed across their life span? Which of these events led to successful ageing and which did not? And why is it that similar misfortunes lead to bitterness in one person's life and to gratitude of another? It is these questions that I want to discuss and describe. The aim is to elaborate what factors are involved in the perception of life at retirement related to women (Hugosson, 2003). This aim can be achieved by reconstructing life histories of women and by illustrating possible connections between social background, education and life outcome. Social background in this respect is related to parental education, teacher ratings and socio-economic status. The reconstruction of life histories is done by using qualitative questionnaires and in the analysis the author is trying to identify factors that could have influenced working life, health and retirement. The material in this study comes from the Malmö Longitudinal Study that started in 1938 including all third graders, altogether 1,542 girls and boys. Hallgren as a Swedish educator and a scientist was interested in matters connected to education and social background. He wanted to study the relationship between socioeconomic factors and cognitive ability (Hallgren, 1939). The Malmö Study continued in 1948, 1964, 1974 and 1984, and in 1994 involving both girls and boys. In 1984 and 1994 a qualitative questionnaire was handed out, with a lifeline question (Elgqvist-Saltzman, 1982, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1992, 1994) and a question where the respondents were asked to describe important events that had affected their life. Life line questions have been used in science to illustrate how education and women's life patterns interact (Marcus, 1980). Some of these questions were given to the female respondents only, where they were asked about their family life, working conditions, retirement, caretaking and health. The scientific interest in present study was to illustrate how women's lives were constructed using a life history approach (Thorsen, 1996, 1998; Öberg, 1997; Tossholmen, 2000). Altogether 77 women answered the lifeline question and gave

descriptions of important life events. The context of the study was related to the understanding of lives, the lived lives of these women.

It was important, for me as a scientist, before the analysis of the material to understand the social and the historic context of these women. I had to understand what the city of Malmö was like during the 1930s, when these women were ten years of age, and what was Sweden like during their upbringing? Happenings and understanding are dependent on the social and cultural background. That is why it is important to place situations within their historical context (Abeles and White Riley, 1976-77). The city of Malmö had some 151,000 inhabitants and was mainly an industrial city, needing both female and male labourers. The need of labour force led to competition for work especially for men while women worked mainly in different occupations. In spite of the industrial needs the unemployment was high due to factory mechanisations and over and above the worldwide depression of the 1930s (Elmér, 1975; Furu and Furu, 1992). The Swedish society went through several changes, during this period, with the help from politicians and economists. What became to be called the "Swedish Model" developed with the intention of stopping inflation, combatting unemployment and with the ambition of protecting women and children, through social- political- and legal actions (Tuijnman, 1990; Wikander, 1992; Larsson, 1994). The educational system also went through different changes but few studies have taken into account the differences between the life situations of women and men and their abilities to take advantage of educational opportunities (Elgqvist-Saltzman, Forslund, Sampei and Sjöström, 1986). Most women included in the present study were born between 1925 and 1928 and they grew up in the early 1930s, during the great economic depression. The Second World War affected their childhood and educational attainment. Much of their early adult life was during the prosperous development of the welfare state in Sweden. Before retirement they experienced the labour market conflict in the 1980s and their retirement in the early 1990s was affected by the reorganisation of the health services.

The conceptual framework of this study was within the interpretative paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1992) using a life history approach (Stromqvist, 1990, 2000). Antonovsky's sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1985, 1987), WHO's definition of Quality of Life (WHO, 1991) and The Resource Conversion Theory and Social Change (Coleman, 1971, 1990) have been used as theoretical understandings. The analysis of data has been done with the help of both quantitative and qualitative methods, including descriptive statistics for the background variables, life history for the reconstruction of self images and hermeneutics for interpretation and description of lived lives (Ödman, 1979; Öberg, 1997). Did these 77 women differ from the women that did not answer the life line question or the question where the respondents were asked to describe important events that had affected their life? Yes, they did in some of the social background variable

such as teacher ratings, social class and in acquired level of schooling. Women that responded to the questions came from a somewhat higher social class, their teachers had rated their intelligence somewhat higher and they had acquired a slightly higher level of schooling as compared to the total female population. Studies have shown that level of schooling and social class can make individuals feel more confident and with that it is easier for them to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In the interpretation and description of lived lives it was found that seven different analytical dimensions had been involved, these dimensions were used in the life line and in the description of important events. Women had related their experiences to retirement, network, work, health, leisure, care-taking and economy. Different combinations, descriptions and perceptions of these involved dimensions made up six deviating patterns of life. The result of the analysis gave these following six deviating patterns of life: (1) the ordinary life with its ups and downs; (2) the hard but rich life; (3) life is full of possibilities; (4) life is full of challenges; (5) life is a disappointment; and finally (6) being deserted.

In this first pattern, 'ordinary life with its ups and downs', women related their life to marriage, children and their daily life as ordinary happenings, nothing to fuss about and their life experiences were often satisfactory. They were all married with or without children, they were found to have had care-taking responsibilities for relatives and for their own family members. They also seemed to have had social support that was important. In the pattern the 'hard but rich life', women had felt they were being left alone with all the responsibility for children, home, economy and working life. Life had in many ways been hard and trying. Most women were either divorced or widows. The hardships were related to, being left alone due to sudden and unexpected divorce, death of husband which came as a shock, loss of children due to accident and often related to their own health or impaired health status. Women belonging to the pattern 'life is full of possibilities', could always find a solution to things in life. Many of these women had stayed at home and cared for their family while children were young, which they had not regretted. They had managed to combine family, children and work successfully. Some had a very active professional life, with a career of their own. The attitude of "come what may, I can handle it" is a good illustration of the spirit of women belonging to the pattern 'life is full of challenges'. These women were mainly strong independent women who had done different things in life and managed it well. Events in life were looked upon as challenges and had been used as a new starting point. Very few were divorced, most of them were married. Care-taking was there but not that obvious, while networks are mentioned as important and a part they have taken active actions in maintaining. Most women have had a good health only some have had medical problems. 'Being deserted' is the last described pattern of life, these women have sensed a feeling of bitterness and that they have been deserted by everything and

everybody, eg. by people they love, life itself, themselves or by the society. This feeling seems to be outside their own control. The result, related to all perceived lives, shows that network, health and care-taking were the dimensions affecting perception of life most. If women had perceived health as good and that they were still wanted, being involved, the more positive was the outcome of the analysis. In spite of different medical problems, women did perceive life in a positive manner if they had felt they were socially involved.

What were the most striking findings in this material? These women represent my mother's generation and to my knowledge that generation lived in a life long marriage. This study has shown that 25% of the women were divorced. Early retirement had been used by 40% as one way to mind your own time and to stop the hardships of labour. Impaired health was mentioned by 35% and about 20% were widows. If these findings can be considered as pictures of how this generation of women perceives life then my question is, is it easier now for women or men to combine studies, family and an active working life? We are expected to work more and longer to afford social security in future. Society is dependent on an active working force where both women and men take part. Neither family nor society can afford housewives. Part-time work is regarded as a gender trap leading to lower pensions for women. Studies have shown that young families take it for granted to share the maternity-parental leave, giving men a more active role in the family, (the unpaid work) and enabling women to do a career outside the family, (the paid work). The division of labour between women and men will be different in the future. Family life is a complex matter engaging childcare, parental leave and aged parents. Life is nowadays more demanding, where health becomes an even more important aspect. What actions can be taken to make individuals more actively involved in their different lifestyle choices related to health and well being? The concept of life long learning is a necessary tool for economic development. That is why different educational strategies have to be taken such as: part-time studies, distance learning and computerised courses, so that individuals respective of sex can go in and out of education/learning. The Swedish Government wants people to work to the age of 67 or in the near future to the age of 72. Though it is found, using statistics, that very few are working to the age of 65, which is the age of retirement nowadays. Do we want to continue working up to the age of 72? How can society combat youth unemployment, if age of retirement is increased? Present study has given more questions than answers and that is why I feel it is important to continue doing research involving people in the real world, trying to interpret and understand their life world, for better understanding of individual lives and their choices.

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