

Love Does Not Retire – Not Even After a Half Century of Marriage

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Abstract Aim: Love and intimate relationships are appreciated and considered an important source of personal pleasure and support especially in the modern busy world. The feeling of being loved and the opportunity to show love are valuable both to the young and the elderly. However, keeping up a good and happy intimate relationship or marriage seems challenging. The secret of long-lasting marriages has been studied although no definite answer has been found. **Method:** In this research, couples who had been married around 50 years were asked to write their love stories in the form of informal letters. Altogether, the data comprised 117 letters or love stories. The writers were aged between 50 and 91 and their average age was 70 years. In this article, the following questions are addressed: 1) How do the elderly describe their experiences of a long-lasting marriage? 2) How have they managed to sustain their marriage or what factors do they consider, according to their experiences and perceptions, important to make the marriage endure? 3) What does a decades-long marriage give and demand and what is its significance? **Results and Conclusion:** Based on the results, a model of a long-lasting intimate relationship is introduced.

Keywords: love, marriage, seniors, intimate relationships, aging

1. Introduction

Even the 21st century people—and younger too—hope and dream of lasting love, permanent human relationships, and family. Love is appreciated and considered an important source of personal pleasure and support. High expectations are placed on an intimate relationship. It should give its best, function as a place to rest, hide, and grow and offer safety, adventures, and recreation. People, who demand plenty on their life, expect that love will heal, remove obstacles of happiness, their own deficiencies and bad sides and provide perfect pleasure.

The higher expectations, hopes, and demands are the greater are disappointments. Yet, disappointments are inevitable. Dreams turn into traps when they involve hopes that cannot be fulfilled. Personal plans fail and relationships break down. Instead of relieving, love hurts. High divorce rates prove it. For example, 50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages end in divorce in the USA (Baker, 2007). In Finland, 29,952 marriages were contracted and 13,619 dissolved in 2010 (Statistics Finland, 2010a). Nowadays, about half of Finnish marriages end after approximately 11 years of marriage (Valtavaara, 2007).

There are also marriages that last. The secret of their permanence has been studied although no definite answer has been found. The absolute group of experts on stable relationships consists of seniors who have experienced a long-lasting marriage; in other words, those people who have been able or are about to celebrate their 50th or golden wedding anniversary. The number of these people is low: no more than 3 % of

all marriages make it to the 50-year mark (Troll, 1975; see also Statistics Finland, 2010b) but they have valuable experiential knowledge about what a long marriage requires and gives in order to stay satisfactory.

Many kinds of prejudices are linked to seniors' life. People prefer considering their life as peaceful and filled with love that lends wings from the memories gathered along the decades. Surely, seniors are allowed to love and even hoped to receive love but some limits of appropriateness are set for it and these limits do not involve powerful emotional storms, break-ups, or falling in love (Määttä, 2011a; Watson, Bell, & Stelle, 2010). The relationship network that comprises children, grandchildren, siblings and other family members are considered natural and valuable for seniors. These people give content and support in seniors' life. However, people do not lose their ability to love romantically along aging (Lang & Fingerman, 2004). Although the physical appearance may change, emotional life stays strong and senses receptive. Feelings and social and mental abilities are not age-bound.

The basic need for love does not disappear along aging although these needs may be fulfilled differently than previously. Becoming accepted and the need to love and receive love are undeniable and natural regardless of age, health, or gender (Reis & Rusbult, 2004). The feeling of being loved and the opportunity to show love are valuable both to the elderly and the young (Berscheid & Reis, 1998).

Previous studies have tried to analyze and illustrate typical relationship processes among the elderly (e.g. Antonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Field, 1981; Levitt, 2000). Likewise, the interest has been focused on the essence and meaning of friendship in later life (Adams & Blieszner, 1998; Gupta & Korte, 1994; Matt & Dean, 1993; Swain, 1989) as well as on relationships with grandchildren (Birren, 2001; Dolbin-MacNab, 2006; Hayslips & Goldberg-Glen, 2000; Shore & Hayslip, 1994; Somary & Stricker, 1998).

Furthermore, falling in love in later life has been studied (Määttä, 2011b); and long marriages have interested researchers already for decades (e.g. Parron & Troll, 1978; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman 1993; Noël-Miller, 2011; Sporakowski & Axelson, 1984). Research has mostly leaned on self-assessment measures and/or included comparisons between various age cohorts.

The question of how the elderly talk about their long-lasting marriages has remained unexplored. The aim of this article is to describe what love really means and what it evokes in the thoughts, souls, and hearts of the Finnish elderly. The purpose of this research was to find answers how the spouses were able to keep up their marriages through their life spans for decades. What binds them, what kind of thoughts and experiences they have and what kind of practices they have created in their relationship to sustain it for decades? What factors explain long marriages in the light of couples' experiences?

The inspiration to write this article sprang from the thought we found in the participants' stories. Despite their high age, the elderly do not have to sit by and watch life—instead, they can fully participate. Many participants' belief to their abilities and desire to see more has been the reason to write and participate in this research. Furthermore, they have wanted to help and wished to set an example to others: "I wish a happy future for all young couples in their trying" (Mary, 91 years old).

2. Theoretical Background: How to Maintain an Intimate Relationship?

The greatest feeling, love, touches people with its whole scale—all the way from the extreme feelings of joy and raptness to the deepest forms of disappointment, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior. This very fact is assured by a proverb from eastern Finland: "Love takes half of the mind from a wise guy, all of it from a fool." In all its glamour, love represents a fascinating, mysterious, and paradoxical world whose charm does not seem to dissolve in people's dreams, hopes, and behavior. Just like an addition, love can also have an oppressive, clinging, obsessive, or repressive nature (Määttä, Uusi-Autti, & Määttä, 2012). At its greatest, love gives its target freedom and space to become more, to grow as a human and develop his or her talents into better and better.

Indeed, love is nuanced, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, as Han Suyin (1952) calls it when analyzing love. This perception is also supported by John Lee's (1973) well-known typology of love where he compares the forms of falling in love with the colors of a rainbow. He distinguishes six ways of falling in love: the primary three forms are erotic, playful, and companionable love and the other, secondary forms are manic, considerate, and unselfish love. These types of love form numerous combinations that cannot be calculated; which is analogous with the number of colors. There are countless other classifications constructed from the phases or essence of love. Tzeng (1992) has created an octagon model, Shirley (1982) a vector model, Reiss (1960) a circle. Furthermore, there are, for example, a filter theory (Kerchhoff & Davis, 1962), ABCDE-model (Levinger, 1983), balance, exchange, and equilibrium theories (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

Robert J. Sternberg (from Yale) has studied the essence of love for 25 years after having studied intellectuality. He has tried to explain why people find someone attractive but not others and why some intimate relationships endure even if facing hardships but others fail. The explanation has not been found in his theory about psychometric type of love created at the beginning of the 1980s, not in triangle theory (intimacy, passion, commitment) (Sternberg, 1986), nor in the illustration of love as a story ("Love Is A Story") (Sternberg, 1988). Sternberg distinguished 26 love stories which he categorized into five different types of story. The final collection of stories or categorization is still missing.

All in all, there are studies, illustrations, and models about the factors that comprise love, how love changes, how an intimate relationship develops from falling in love into love, how an intimate relationship ends, and how to survive from a divorce. Yet, after presenting these attempts to define love, it is necessary to emphasize that love is a complex phenomenon (Bierhoff & Schmohr, 2004). Everyone loves in his/her own way regardless of age or gender. Love may occur in different forms: in addition to romantic love, there is love for fellow human beings (Paldanius & Määttä, 2011), friendship, parental love, love of one's country, love for nature and animals, and teachers' pedagogical love (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011). They have much in common—and they are endangered or over-sized expectations are placed at them in the modern world. Love appears as an endeavor to make things and phenomena develop, grow, and emerge.

At its best, love brings pleasure, happiness, and balance. Love is hoped to be the Holy Grail that removes displeasure and all the obstacles away from one's own happiness. The Holy Grail of love may, however, prove sweet poison. Love does not necessarily appear as wanted; not by trying nor demanding. Love cannot be advanced by intimidating and it always involves the risk of losing and becoming abandoned. Love does not guarantee requisite love, trust may lead to disappointment, and confiding can hurt. What special features love in later life has or how the elderly talk about love has not been studied much. Nor are there many comparisons about the differences in adolescent and senior love. (Määttä, 2011b.)

3. The Aim of This Research

This article is based on a research project in Finland which aimed at analyzing the content and meaning of love scheme in people's life span and identity formation. The research was divided into several separate parts and the purpose of this article is to dissect the experiences through seniors' descriptions (Määttä, 2005). Based on the results, the purpose is to support the positive dimension of old age: it can be the time of opportunities that involve enjoying life. Old age is an emotionally important phase in people's life span.

This article aims at describing, classifying, and analyzing how the elderly experience their long-lasting marriages. In this article, we focus on the following research questions:

- 1) How do the elderly describe their experiences of a long-lasting marriage?
- 2) How have they managed to maintain their marriage or what factors do they consider, according to their experiences and perceptions, important to make the marriage endure?
- 3) What does a decades-long marriage give and demand? What is the significance of a long marriage?

4. Data and Methods

4.1 The Execution of the Research

The Finnish elderly were asked to write their own love story. This wish was transmitted via Finnish periodicals. To help their writing about love experiences, participants were given an instructional leaflet with the heading "*I would give my all to you; I would carry you on my arms*". Some specifying questions were posed in order to guide their answers but however, it was emphasized that the most important thing was to describe their own love story through those experiences that they find important to themselves.

Data was purposefully collected in the form of informal letters because in that way people could reveal what they really think and feel. The assumption was that through the letters, the many forms and shades of seniors' love would be revealed in the best way. In addition, the purpose was to give the participants the chance to deliberate and outline their answers freely in peace. Therefore, these letters were written in people's everyday life without the researcher's intervention. The writers had defined what to include in their stories and what was left untold.

What the stories had in common was their vivid and rich narration about the experiences of love. In addition, the participants could self determine the answers to the questions about who senior citizens are or when senior age begins. The writers were aged between 50 and 91 and their average age was 70 years. Age could not be defined distinctively from all stories. However, those who were selected in this research had been married for around 50 years.

The data comprised altogether 117 letters or love stories. 72 of the writers were women and 38 of them were men. There were seven stories that were signed together. The lengths of the letters varied between a few sheets and over one hundred pages of detailed biographies. The expressions varied between powerfully catching flow in some narratives to touching, simplified phrasing. Most of the writers described the joy and happiness of their love but among the responses there were some rough stories of disappointments as well.

Although the writers could have sent the letters anonymously, many of them gave their contact information and expressed their willingness of giving supplementary information if necessary. In this article, all are treated anonymously. Instead, the writers are referred here with actual ages but fictitious names that reveal, however, their gender.

As Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, qualitative data comes in the form of words rather than in numbers. The issue, then, is how to move from these words to data analysis as moving from coding to interpretation is a crucial phase (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Silverman, 2005). Interpretation involves transcending factual data and analyzing cautiously what is at the core of it.

The letters were read several times. Based on them, an overall description of the emotional experience of love was created. The content analysis proceeded in steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawings (see Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the "raw" data (Silverman, 2005). Data reduction involves making decisions about what data chunks or themes will provide the initial focus. Data display is "an organized assembly of information that permits conclusion drawings" (Silverman, 2005, p. 78) through which it was possible to specify the answers to the research questions. The aim was to create the categories that describe the seniors' experiences of love. In order to be able to show the contents in practice, plenty of quotations from the respondents' letters are added within the results section of this article. In addition, the quotations function as the proofs for reliability. At the end, conclusions are drawn, which means "beginning to decide what things mean, noting regularities, patterns, explanations, causal flows, and proportions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 22).

4.2 *The Reliability of the Research*

Certainly the generalizability, validity, and reliability of the results can be criticized. How filtered the stories in these letters were? One can paper over the events, highlight one's own experiences, or protect the close ones. Memories or stories are always summaries of the courses of events reconstructed afterwards by the tellers. Nor is one able to write everything one has experienced. Memory is also selective: sometimes memories grow sweeter with time; some other time reality appears rougher than it actually was.

It is hard to estimate to what extent the picture in these stories is exaggerated or prettified. However, the letters give the idea that the writers wanted to give about of their life. Writing about life well or in a right way is as difficult as living such a life. What people define as their experience is especially important. It has its own significance as such; and indeed, the impression that a writer has got about the events directs in many ways his/her overall behavior in everyday life. Not only those days that are gone constitute life but also those that we remember. In that form, the letters describe every writer's way of assessing their own life, the chains of events, and emotions that mold it. At the end, it is not salient whether the writers describe the happenings comprehensively or truthfully but their interpretation of what actually happened.

The motives for writing the letters were diverse. Many wanted to share their experience of a successful relationship although they did not hide the problems either. Despite of problems, the attitude towards life was bright among many of the participants: "I thank my spouse for every day" (Robin, aged 82). For some participants, writing functioned as a way to understand one's self. "By writing, I see myself with the new eyes and sometimes wonder the opening views. Maybe, this all will guide others as well" (Carol, aged 74). Many had experienced the therapeutic nature of writing. Some found writing delightful; however sometimes, it opened someone's old wounds. Some were surprised of the strength of their own feelings and wanted to transmit their experiences to others.

5. Findings: What Do 50-Year-Long Marriages Have in Common?

5.1 *What is the Secret of a Long-Lasting Marriage?*

Seniors' long marriages appeared in all colors of a rainbow (see Lee, 1973). Their love stories do not tell only about the glory or easiness of a marriage. There was not a single couple who had not confronted disappointments, become annoyed or frustrated with their spouse or relationship. The longer had the path together been the more special features the relationships had. Every marriage is a one-of-a-kind, special world created by two extraordinary people (Määttä, 2011a; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2010).

Many writers had their own explanation about what the happiness of their marriage or their dissatisfaction is based on. Still, many of them noted that there is not any universal explanation or universally applicable advice to give to others: "Water carried into a well does not stay in there—everyone has their own personality and heels" (Ann, married for 53 years).

In addition, marriage can be successful without any advice as 85-year-old Emily and Kyle (married for 65 years) point out: "There is no such advice that would suit everyone and you can live peacefully without advice as well. We do intend to celebrate our iron wedding anniversary [75th wedding anniversary]. It's no use divorcing any longer, but how can you know for sure."

There are not any guarantees that a marriage will last nor is it obvious even after being married for 65 years. Perhaps, the secret of long marriage is that very thing that the spouses do not consider it obvious but appreciate the staidness of their marriage (Hess & Pullen, 1994).

Some participants highlighted that the long marriage may be just coincident or benign fate:

"I don't consider my successful marriage as my own credit. It suits some people but does not for increasing number of people in the whirlwind of this modern world. We have had a benign fate—so far." (Martin, married for 50 years).

Some participants emphasized the meaning of mature age and life experience in successful marriage. Expectations are not that exaggerated or unrealistic than when younger (see also Levenson, Carstenson, & Gottman, 1994): "We haven't faced burnout in our marriage because we haven't placed any high expectations at our marriage. Only that we feel good being together." (Lily, married for 42 years).

On the other hand, someone named the fact that they had been married when young as a binding factor. The mutual affinity was strengthened by numerous shared experiences, overcome hardships, and colorful memories: "Education of life together and knowing each other began when we were quite young. We have a saying that one can regret everything else but not the one that one was married with when young." (Peter, married for 53 years).

The elderly emphasized the meaning of goodwill, flexibility, and patience the most. One cannot have everything but still it is not necessary to give up the hopes and doings that matter to one self (Ferring & Filipp, 1995; Kunzmann, Todd, & Smith, 2000). Shared basic values and mutual harmony seem to lay a stable foundation for a marriage (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). The balance is achievable if one ponders the realities of life soundly: "We have had a harmonious life together maybe because we had both adopted a thought that 'because you are not perfect either'" (Tim, married for 69 years).

"You cannot give up too easily—in life in general nor when living together with someone. You also have to appreciate your family. We have found our family more important than gathering lucre. You can be satisfied with less in economic sense also today and you don't have demand everything ready at once" (Walter and Elizabeth, married for 52 years).

5.2 *Where Did Love Begin?*

Many couples who were about to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary fell in love during the World War II, in the 1940s. Going to the War and being in active duty reflected in couples' lives in a way that is hard to understand by an outsider. Fear of death followed them as a shadow hunger, coldness, and tiredness in tow. War time was hard also for women and children at home who waited for their loved ones to come home and lived in constant fear. Women were obliged to be in the field and logging sites and do other work as well that were traditionally regarded as men's job.

They had to go short on everyday comfort and everyone lacked food and daily goods. Life was controlled in many ways: control cards and state regulations restricted life. War time made people serious and they were not able to enjoy adolescent amusements and dating. Among other things, the state ordained a ban on dancing, "indecent merry-making", which was considered immoral when people were killed in the fronts at the same time. Also dance floors were forbidden (as in Finland, people used to dance outside on a simple dance floor accompanied by live musicians).

Many seniors' love story reveals that dating remained minimal during the war. Still, they remembered all the details concerning it clearly. Although they could not meet too often, letters were written and sent with a will. Because of them, love was ignited and flowered.

"We met for the first time before the Winter War [Finno-Russo War]: he, a high school student, had to—as his own school was put in military use—sit at the co-educational school and at my desk. We started to write letters to each other but we did not meet for several years. During the War, he served as a fighter pilot and I was a lotta [served in a Finnish voluntary auxiliary paramilitary organization for women]. We were married after I had graduated in 1948" (Gertrude, married for 55 years until widowed).

Many seniors emphasized the meaning of their partner's appearance when telling about how they had met and all the fun phases and even incidents that led to that. Some outer feature or clothing took their notice and increased their interest in the other already 60 years ago—as people do in today's love stories as well:

"I saw Toby for the first time at the co-operative store and remember that he wore different kinds of clothes than other boys in the village did... At the study club (in the 1930s), he used to take me playing,

changed coupons for porridge in order to be able to eat porridge on the same plate... He was good-looking, smiled attractively" (Sylvia, married for 60 years).

Some kind of special or magical destiny featured some seniors' first encounter. At once, they were certain that they belong to together. This kind of powerful emotional experience has stayed clearly in many seniors' minds for decades:

"That was love in the first sight when we met. As if an electric current had gone through my hand. He was a handsome, curly-haired man who had just returned from the War" (Totty, married for 55 years).

"He would even ski for 40 kilometers [25 miles] ... to meet me (in the 1930s)" (Esther, married for 60 years until widowed).

The weddings were often arranged in quite modest circumstances. Couples' memories and experiences even about the wedding night are not very thrilling – on the contrary. Their descriptions about the austerity of their wedding night merely raise a laugh. The contrast to the images about wedding night and the harsh reality is big. Yet, their memories about less romantic wedding keep fresh all through their lives.

"We agreed that we would have our wedding on Easter in 1941 and at the fiancé's home as Toby's father had wanted... I wonder how many times the fiancé whispered 'if only I could get next to you', 'only 20 hours to go', 'only ten hours and then we could leave'. We spent the night in a big room with about 20 other people. What a wedding night that was. My husband whispered 'now, you are mine'. I said 'shut up, people will hear'" (Sylvia, married for 60 years).

5.3 *The Foundation Pillars of a Marriage*

The elderly described the development and phases of their relationship with many expressions. The stories include funny details but serious deliberation about the justification for the solutions made. The long past made them occasionally wonder whether they could have done something better and whether the road they had chosen had been the right one. Their stories contain joy, disappointments, pondering, and gratitude—many kinds of feelings. Many of them stress that in older age, security and intimacy are salient in mature love. (Takahaski, Tamura, & Tokora, 1997.)

5.3.1 Life Experiences Bring Spouses Closer

If life has been stormy and colored by hardships, the spouse's company provides a safe stronghold. Evenings at home, shared berry-picking excursions, going to the summer house, and gardening refresh many seniors' life. Little trouble is forgotten and they do not have to grow old alone. (cf. Dykstra, 2009; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996).

After the War time or other trials, good life is perceived concretely. It consists of peace, security, stable subsistence, and health. The ability to enjoy peaceful life together embodies the everyday life in many long marriages. (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Peters et al., 2007.)

"Now, when we are already over 80 years old, you find the other more and more important and loved. The other can't go out of sight. During the days, we take care of household work and enjoy the peace of our home. We can be grateful for life." (Elaine and Reynold, married for 55 years)

On the other hand, there were couples who take back the lost years and gather new kinds of experiences. The spouses go to gym or travel together, participate in charity work or haste to an ICT course; and even children are amazed by their activeness: "Less hurry would do it, say our children, but we are okay with this course. We spend the cold season in Las Palmas and other times in Finland" (Sally, married for 52 years).

5.3.2 Hard Duties Behind

Life during the War required plenty of work and people had duties. Therefore, couples had to adjust love and marriage within the terms of the duties of that time. As a counterbalance to hard life and back-breaking work, long marriage is seen as enriching both physically and mentally, as a sort of platform or provider of new views after the stormy hardships of life.

"War-time experiences and the uncertainty of life affected us at the beginning of our marriage. Everything that we planned started with 'if'. That was also something new that first you had to be scared to death for four years and then start to build on torn land and build up your own and your young wife's dreams into such a form that you can live" (Levi, married for 59 years).

However, after the scarcity and insecurity during the War, mourning did not end for everyone. Still, the difficulties experienced together may have bonded the spouses and the love and support received for each other can turn into a foundation pillar of marriage. Stories about losing one's child are still harrowing. "Life hasn't treated us gently with kid gloves." (Kirsten, married for 46 years until widowed).

Also, illnesses have tested many senior couples' relationship. Surviving from them proves their bond and power of love. "Being ill, if any, puts both through the wringer. Then, it is about 'for worse'. I can gratefully say that my husband was the real support and safety for me when I was sick. At that time, if ever, you have to notice the solid base on which our life together has grounded through years" (Kirsten, married for 46 years until widowed).

Many seniors' marriages started in economically modest circumstances. Cherishing their own privacy and mutual relationship was almost impossible because of the confined living conditions. Taking care of relatives featured their everyday life as well. Being satisfied for less was typical of many couples' life. Instead, they appreciated the fact that they could live together after being separated during the war time.

"We didn't have high demands at that time. I decided when being homeless that even if my home was three-cornered, I wouldn't complaint about my apartment. The most important thing is that we could be together. That promise I have kept" (Sylvia, married for 60 years).

5.3.3 Overcoming the Hardships Together

After having survived from the war time or the pitfalls of otherwise hard life, the confidence in overcoming other difficulties becomes stronger. Along their aging, their experiences form the wisdom of life (Steверink & Lindenberg, 2006).

Marital duties and responsibility is considered as the spice of life and anchor. Having become hardened by experienced hardships, couples were able to proportion trouble. Many love stories revealed their desire and ability to solve also marital problems by talking.

"Our joint travel began with the wedding ceremony from which we returned home on a horse ride night sky above us. The shares that were distributed in exchange for food cards after the war were small and you had to be able to cook with less. We had short of everything else as well; clothes, shoes, etc. Love was the source for daily life. We overcame everything by talking together" (Tottie, married for 55 years).

5.3.4 Shared Hobbies

Spouses' common hobbies and shared interests are also foundation pillars of a long marriage. With them, their life stays rich and active after children have grown up and they have more time to spend together (Ade-Ridder, 1985).

"After recovering from illnesses, we have participated in voluntary work actively, we write, paint... by encouraging each other" (Tottie, married for 55 years).

"We go dancing at least twice a week. We haven't missed a single day-time dances in five years" (Karen and Paul, married for 50 years).

Many of the participants had understood that besides time together, it is necessary to have one's own time: "I guess it's for good that we separate from each other at least when busying ourselves with hobbies; otherwise we would be together all the time." (Irwin, married for 43 years). Having one's own space may, however, take a long time and spouses' are not always even aware of the need for separateness.

Shared activities form a fund of experiences which is like an emotional bank account. Along long life, seniors have gathered plenty of savings. The more positive years people have spent together, the richer and more valuable become the world built together. It also functions as a safe for a rainy day. It is easier to confront trouble if the couple has built strong confidence that difficulties can be solved (Hatch, 2004). The positive fund of experiences protects the marriage against problems and provides strength for finding favorable solutions (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2009; Maisel & Gable, 2009).

5.3.5 Caring

The core of all love is caring. Regardless of age, people find the feeling of getting support, comfort, and security important. Caring is manifested as the way spouses notice each other (Kulik, 2002). At their best, they care about how the other one is doing. Caring is shown in empathetic acts both in the little moments in everyday life and in the highlights.

"Love is like a long-distance run: not any spurt for the finishing line but long home straight. Together it is easier to bear the loads: together we are strong." (Peter, married for 53 years)

"The older you grow, the more necessary the spouses find each other. Two people cope better at home as well by helping each other." (Letitia, married for 50 years)

Seniors' love stories show the power of love as the answer to the basic question: what people are ready to do in the name of love? It seems that some couples' actions of love and caring do not have any upper limit. Helping and supporting the spouse strictly in the dark turning points of life proves how untamed and heroic love can be.

"During the last few years of our marriage, my spouse's disease would just progress. A couple of times she told me: Wouldn't it be better that I died; it would be easier for you too. I assured her that I can take care of her just fine and told that because we had been together for such a long time, I hoped that we could still carry on our life together for a long time. I tried to take care of my own shape. Indeed, I was in a fairly good shape and did not get ill much. Emilie did say to me: 'How can you be so healthy and I'm like this?' I answered that I have to be so that I can take care of you" (Kyle, married for 57 years until widowed).

Although a spouse's conditions require plenty of work, 24/7 caring, and limits one's life strictly, the elderly told that they were glad to take care of their partners. With this act for love, people can strengthen their belief that they have lived in the right way and borne their responsibility.

5.3.6 Sense of Humor

The ability to laugh, rejoice, and joke is vital for everyone. Playfulness and sense of humor protect against many harms. Some seniors said that they have their own inside thing because of which others do not always understand them. Sense of humor also helps tolerating or accepting unpleasant things such as the other's minor but irritating features or obstacles that hinder one's own activities. "Jovial character has certainly made our relationship easier" (Caroline, 62 years old, married for 40 years).

5.3.7 Shared Basic Values

In a long marriage, spouses resemble each other in many ways: they share similar values and attitudes as well as social background, education, and personal characteristics (e.g. Bruze, 2011). Mutual harmony and like-mindedness also increase the sense of belonging together.

Children and grandchildren bind many spouses. They have borne their responsibility for children and wanted to provide their children with proper living conditions (Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Thiele & Whelan, 2008). They told about the consistency and mutually agreed rules in rearing:

"In rearing, we have tried to stick to the forbiddance so that children did not have to ask the same thing from the other parent. Our relationship with children has remained good. Otherwise, it has been important in our life that we have tried to cherish our promises, including the wedding vow" (Levi, married for 59 years).

All the good given to children becomes rewarded in later life. Shared rearing responsibility and appreciating children bring joy even when old. Many couples found it binding that they could be proud of their children's lives and enjoy the care their children aim at them as well. Good relationships with children are important especially in the late phase of life span.

Grandchildren have a special place in seniors' hearts. Children and grandchildren bring content in life and create the sense of security as well—although Grandpa-Martin (married for 50 years) stated that "when you have many loved ones, you are more vulnerable too". Naturally, there are those grandparents who do not like to meet their children and grandchildren actively. They prefer retiring or use their time with other interesting activities.

5.3.8 Dissimilarity Makes Stronger and Tests

Despite their similarity, many seniors described their dissimilarities as well. Mutual dissimilarity complements and brings richness to a relationship, but tensions as well (e.g. Lutz-Zois et al., 2006). Many participants told that they had learned to tolerate the spouse's dissimilarity although the tolerance had been tested every now and then. People would like to mold their spouse to fulfill their preferences, hopes, and needs (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2010).

Long life together includes many various phases that have shaken the relationship. Couples have gone through changes in life, related to having children and withdrawing from home, busy working life, retiring, illnesses, and financial pressures. Along with these changes, one's own changing and maturing may have been confusing—not to mention the insecurity caused by the spouse's changing. Still despite their dissimilarity or maybe because of it, they have been able to live together. Some of them have turned their dissimilarity into a resource.

"Convex and concave, was a proverb in our wedding present. I think it resembles the higher education of life: tolerating the other one's dissimilarity" (Gertrude 82 years old, married for 55 years until widowed).

Still after decades of being married, the spouse's characteristics and traits may seem like a mystery. According to the seniors, the assumption that one knows the other inside out is an illusion. "We are the opposites. Paul is flexible but a solid road that goes by the corn field. I am like air, moody. He is charming, I am temperamental" (Pearl, married for 48 years).

5.3.9. Respecting the Spouse

Seniors told about all that their spouses had accomplished, achieved, and handled during their life together in a respectful manner. Many of them still seemed amazed of the spouse's diligence and effectiveness. "Afterwards, I can only marvel how she managed to do and handle everything" (Peter, married for 53 years) or "I marvel at her industriousness; she always busies with something" (Esmond, married for 54 years).

In a stable, long-lasting marriage, respect is also shown by letting the other be oneself. Spouses accept each other with their own characteristics and peculiarities. A satisfying intimate relationship provides space to act and think in one's own way (Uusiautti & Määttä, 2010). Then, one can seize new challenges and chances and fulfill one's dreams even in later life. A marriage where spouses cherish their mutual appreciation supports their growth and development regardless of age. "And what has this all demanded? First of all, noticing and respecting the other, 'appreciate the other, too'" (Rachel, married for 48 years).

The participants had used the words of appreciation and admiration abundantly. However, there were love stories where people blame themselves for not giving enough credit to the other. Someone even mentioned that she had not thanked much but "never condemned him either" (Irene, married for 52 years until widowed).

The words of appreciation, respect, and thanking enhance self-esteem and coping. They are pleasing and inspiring. On the other hand, hardly anyone yearns for great superlative and one can cope without thanking if the relationship does not involve negative the stings of quashing, disregards, and understatement. They erode the relationship and no one is immune to naughtiness.

5.3.10 Accepting and Appreciating Aging

Along aging, people's outer presence changes and the elderly do not match with the beauty ideals that are admired in the contemporary society. Although, on one hand, people respect age and experience, aging is also considered burden. However, changes in body do not take the wind out of the sails of those seniors who have the experience of being appreciated and accepted as they are by their spouses:

"It is not any cliché that it feels good to grow old together. Although others would run away from our graying hair and increasing wrinkles, we are proud of them. This is how it should be and we have the same rhythm" (Heather, married for 48 years).

Many seniors find it pleasing that they can share their experience of aging with all its joys and sorrows with their partners (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2009). It is valuable to know that the spouse can appreciate aging as well and the life experience gathered. And spouses can joke about the changes that take place along aging: "Her face and hair get new slight changes just before I have gotten bored of the previous ones" (Levi, married for 59 years).

5.3.11 Sexuality

Sex and eroticism as a part of seniors' love has conflicting associations. On the one hand, the theme has been unspoken and avoided (e.g. Loe, 2009). It has involved attitudes and prejudices about seniors' rights and possibilities. Sex has not been considered necessary or even possible for the elderly. On the other hand, louder addresses for senior sex have been given space recently (e.g. Weston, 2009). However, the elderly in this research pointed out that if sexuality is over-emphasized or if love is seen only as vivid sex life, the picture of love becomes narrower and the pressures on sexual life can become stressful. There is not just one way of being happy; every senior knows that.

Some seniors' life experiences support their sexuality: "Sex is better than ever" (Irwin, married for 43 years) or "along with time, inhibitions have disappeared and skills developed" (Paula, married for 42 years). Someone has not learned to enjoy sex until in later life or "is able to brighten up the faded colors of sexuality" (Sylvia, married for 60 years). The seniors are able to appreciate the ability to fall in love and love in this sense as well.

Furthermore, many seniors emphasized the multiformity of the manifestation of their sexuality. They did not want to define sexuality only as sexual activity but based on becoming loved, admired, and appreciated and giving love as well. Thus, sexuality means joy, pleasure, voluptuousness, intimacy, and fascination—an intimate bond that makes two persons a couple in a special way that connects only them.

Eroticism may appear as a warm smile and look, tender hug, storing the other's cheek or head, warm hand shake, and becoming accepted as is—intimacy and presence. The forms of sexuality vary and change; but in some form sexuality is present in a happy couple's life all the time. "Now, the fire of our love is in flames sometimes but mostly it smolders—yet burns all the time" (Matt, 74 years old, married for 52 years).

Some seniors' sex life is, however, burdened with diverging or differentiating expectations (see also Murstein & Tuerkheimer, 1998). Someone's sexual activity stays spry while some other may lose some or all of his or her sexual drive. Many elderly have to contemplate the questions about sexuality alone because talking about these issues has not been considered appropriate.

5.3.12 Many Tricks for Solving Conflicts

Many kinds of trouble, hardships, and conflicts have occurred during seniors' long marriages. Some of them are acute and bound to a certain moment and situation, minor problems, while others, chronic ones, have been gnawing at the relationship for a long time. Ultimately, it is not about the number of problems but the way spouses tend to solve them (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002)—and the seniors has more than one string to their bow.

Some seniors' solution was not let incubate things but to solve and settle the differences at once. They did not consider it worthwhile losing their sleep or refusing to speak. Along with time, small unsolved issues may become a heavy burden. "Earlier, we did not sweep our disagreements under the carpet but they were thrashed out immediately" (Ann, married for 53 years until widowed).

On the other hand, patience, self-control, and ability to overlook the other's annoying traits may become a shortcut to happiness. "If we argued, Palmer would come to me and say that we don't have time to argue because life is short. If one has some flaws, so does the other as well; there isn't such a thing than perfect human-being" (Esther married for 60 years until widowed).

Appreciating words and actions protect marriage. Then, life together leans on a positive basis and spouses do not have to avoid problems but have the courage to address them understanding that disagreements are a natural part of a long-term relationship.

Furthermore, one has to accept the fact that one cannot always be right or win debates. And even if one was right, it is good to eat humble pie and give up sometimes. "When we have arguments, you have to look at the mirror. Nor is it necessary to nag about the other's weaknesses. You don't lose anything if you admit your own mistakes. It is just strength" (Letitia, married for 50 years).

Every relationship requires compromising and flexibility but it is not necessary to compromise everything. Seniors had been able to make clear what is bargainable and what is not. "Hurting the other does not turn her into better" (Matt, married for 52 years).

Rubbing one's nose in old arguments and insults burdens the relationship. A good principle seems to be the ambition to forget the past and look at the future. Forgetting about becoming hurt is not, however, easy; nor is forgiving. "We don't badger each other with 'what did I say' sophistries or blackmail by saying for 'the last time'" (Graham, married for 55 years).

5.3.13 Self-Respect

People's development does not end along aging but proceeds at new development phases. Erik Erikson emphasized in this famous theory (1994), that at the last phase of life people have to find harmony with their life, themselves, and other people who have belonged in their life. At the latest in senior age, people have to accept not only themselves but also people who matter to themselves as they are—spouses, children, and parents.

"The greatest surprise of life is to get to know yourself. How do you confront joys and sorrows, worries and waivers? Where do you find strength? Can you even learn to know yourself? Or are you constantly in the state of development and never complete?" (Gertrude, married for 55 years).

Growing old may also mean finding oneself and understanding oneself in a new way (Lang & Carstensen, 2002). Then, people are bolder to take the space they need and will not knuckle under demands that downplay their self-respect:

"When I look back at my life, I am satisfied. Eventually, I have been me completely. I haven't tried to underline myself by subjugating others but haven't denied my value either. Maybe, I live the best time of my life right now. There is still something unknown coming ahead and my own maturity shows me the way" (Caroline, married for 42 years).

6. Conclusions

What are the typical traits of seniors' long marriages? Based on the results, it is possible to create a model of a long-lasting intimate relationship. It consists of three core features:

1) Seniors' lasting love involves several important psychological, physical, and social meanings. At its most genuine, mature love is manifested by active acts; in other words, giving, caring, the sense of responsibility, listening, and gratitude. Two equals to more, even in old age. The seniors' stories show how significant love and intimacy are for their self-esteem. The fact that one is accepted and loved without conditions as oneself is of unquestionable value especially along age (see Prieto-Flores et al., 2011). This is how love reflects even in the wellbeing and quality of life of the elderly. Becoming accepted and loved as is, without any conditions, is invaluable especially in old age (Gordon & Chen, 2010). Thus, the model of good life is not standardized into one mold and the wellbeing of the most fragile individuals is guaranteed as well.

2) The lasting love of the elderly varies by spouses and couples and is a personal and comprehensive experience. It consists of those emotions and actions that people regard as manifestations of love. Different people also have various interpretations of love. Although it is not possible to distinguish any special rules of knowledge, emotions, or behavior that would be absolute or common to all intimate relationships among the elderly, some features and experiences are more common than others.

In happy love stories, seniors treat their spouses with care, tenderness, encouragement, and support. In mature love, spouses have many irreplaceable roles in cherishing good life. Their wellbeing is strengthened when they share the following three roles of love mutually:

a) A reliable and stable supporter, bedrock

Spouses can trust in each other's promises about staying together. They accept each other as they are and stand by each other's sides for better and for worse. What life brings cannot be predicted but the certainty that the other supports like bedrock in everyday life has become more and more important along aging. Whatever they will face, they can enter the future together with confident.

b) A self-esteem raiser

Spouses make each other think that they are good as themselves. They appreciate each other and give space and opportunities to become into something they want to. In addition, mutual criticism is supportive.

c) A nurturer

Spouses help each other but supporting each other's dreams, comforting, and encouraging. When one is able to share one's worries and lighten the burden in one's heart with someone who cares, helps, empathizes, and

gives good advice, one gets strength against the hardships of life. Thus, love reflects in seniors' wellbeing and quality of life.

3) The development and nature of seniors' long-lasting intimate relationship is a relational phenomenon. It is defined in each situation through partners' unique characteristics at that moment. The opinions on love may change even among the elderly along age and forthcoming situations in life.

7. Discussion

Ulrich Beck and Elissabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) talk about the chaos of love that is born of the conflict of interests between love, family, and an individual who wants to fulfill his or her self-project and personal freedom. Both men and women seek compulsively for the right and satisfying way of living: they want much of their life, search love and the right partner, try dating, living together and marriages and pursue combining family and career, love and marriage, new kind of motherhood and fatherhood, friendship and companionship. Nor does this road have an end. The scope for action of a family that is build according to traditional gender roles is endangered. Its demands conflict with those expectations that people set for their personal lives.

It is not easy to cultivate long-term relationships. Traditions that previously controlled our life are crumbling and that alone introduces unexpected surprises (Giddens, 1991). The future is not certain; nor does it appear controllable. Working life and the today's turbulence of change have become so demanding that as a counterbalance to them, high expectations are placed on human relationships. Human relationships are hoped to represent the recreation area of life.

Along with aging, opinions on the value of love become deeper. Seniors' way of expressing themselves reaches sometimes such metaphors by their emotional power and articulation that only a few less experienced people can. Furthermore, the definition of love appears wide and comprehensive in seniors' stories. Love may also be friendship and it is important to cherish other forms of love besides romantic love. "Our love became a diamond that just became ennobled until the end of our life" (Esther, married for 60 years until widowed). In addition, spouses are each other's sympathizers, listeners, and helpers. They can enjoy and be happy about each other's presence: "Knowing that sand flows in the hourglass gives the depth for the emotions as well as gratitude that one has been able to experience love as life-maintaining force" (Linda, aged 82).

The experience of life, freedom, and wisdom are valuable but they will not help much if people do not have goals and plans. Health is crucial for the quality of life but even more significant source of zest for life for many seniors is the knowledge that they are needed and they have a mission. According to the results, love can become an important power of life for the elderly (see also Freund & Riediger, 2003). Along with giving and receiving love, people feel themselves important and useful. Whether love is directed in a life companion, children, grandchildren, fellow humans, or various forms of working and doing, arts, ideas, or solving the problems of existence, it is crucial that people preserve sufficiently powerful passions and dreams, maybe even illusions that inspire and make them feel alive. Regardless of age, people's love can act as an impetus for goals that give meaning to life (Schnitker, 2007).

Intimate relationships, family, and love predict successful aging (Stock, Okun, & Benin, 1986). Close and happy human relationships make a good protection against stress and an excellent health insurance. "The friends are the torches by the path of life; they cannot make your way shorter but they will make it brighter" (Mary, aged 80, found a new friend after widowed from a 52-year-long marriage). Despite their high age, the elderly do not have to sit by or aside and watch their life—they can fully participate (Angner et al., 2009). The experiences of life only strengthen the grasp on life in a way that a Chinese proverb emphasizes beautifully by stating that "the flower of experiences carry the fruit of wisdom".

Happy marriages, reciprocal and positive family relationships and good friends seem to work are an efficient protection against stress. "Getting worries out of one's chest is good for health", says a Finnish

proverb. In addition, Cicero has stated how friendship brightens the aura of success and lightens the burden of setbacks.

Eventually, one's own life has value as long as one appreciates others' life. Love and attachment to others and caring are reasons to commit to life. The experience of love and sharing love keep up belief in life and confirm the feeling of the meaningfulness of life—even when growing old.

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