

Instytut Socjologii Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego



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**Understanding Ageing  
in Contemporary Poland:  
Social and Cultural Perspectives**

eds Stella Grotowska, Iwona Taranowicz



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Wrocław 2014

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# Introduction

The topic of old age and ageing is currently being discussed by everyone from politicians, economists and journalists to ordinary people. It figures as a topic in political and media discourse, highlighting the multitude of problems that result from population ageing and that need to be addressed. These issues are being researched by specialists in a variety of disciplines, including demographics, medicine, social policy, economics, psychology and sociology.

This tome is a collection of texts by authors representing admittedly diverse academic fields, but with a shared conviction that the phenomenon of population ageing merits in-depth research, as this megatrend is shaping the future of contemporary society – and hence affects us all.

The book is subdivided into five parts.

The first part – *What is old age nowadays and how do we speak about it?* – explores the social construction of old age in rapidly changing societies, old people's place in social structure, and the language that is used to refer to old age not only in the media, but also in academic and scientific contexts.

The second part – *Privacy, intimacy and home* – consists of four texts that look at how senior citizens function in the private sphere, i.e. in the context of home and familial care, intimacy, sexuality (including non-heteronormative sexuality) and death.

The texts comprising the third part – *Images of old age in contemporary culture* – analyse television drama serials, school textbooks and the relationship between clothing/fashion and (old) age, to show how old age is presented in contemporary culture.

The fourth thematic subsection of the book – *Activity and lifestyles in old age* – is devoted to issues concerning the way senior citizens lead their lives, including the imposition of social restrictions, as well as changes in lifestyle and the emergence of new lifestyles.

The fifth and final part – entitled *Old age in social policy* – consists of four texts which present statistical data concerning old age in Poland, local support structures for senior citizens, the evolution of social care homes, and the activity of institutions that deal with old people.

As can be seen from the above overview of the issues touched upon in the respective articles collected here, this book is an interdisciplinary attempt to grasp and address selected aspects of old age and ageing, from a predominantly cultural perspective.

We trust that our book not only provides a range of interesting perspectives on old age and ageing, but that it will also inspire both reflection and extensive further research.

*Stella Grotowska  
Iwona Taranowicz*



**What is old age nowadays  
and how do we speak about it?**



## **Deconstructing old age? On the evolution of social concepts of the late stage of life**

### **Streszczenie**

Główną tezą artykułu jest twierdzenie o znikaniu starości, rozumianej jako stan ze społecznie przypisanymi atrybutami, z przestrzeni publicznej. Starość zostaje wyparta ze świadomości społecznej, podobnie jak śmierć. Jej miejsce zajmuje procesualne ujęcie ostatniej fazy życia. W artykule omówione zostały społeczne uwarunkowania tej zmiany: przekształcenia rynku pracy, osłabienie systemu ubezpieczeń społecznych opartego na zasadzie solidarności, postępy medycyny, procesy indywidualizacji, zmiany kulturowe.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

dekonstrukcja starości, ludzie starzy, starość, przemiany społeczne

### **Abstract**

The major thesis of the article is the fact that the old age – perceived as a definable and describable state – is vanishing from social space and being replaced by ageing; a process that can be controlled by man. It is the result of ongoing processes: not only ageing, but also more general social processes, such as changes in the job market, the weakening of the social security system based on the solidarity principle, progress in medical science, processes of individualization and cultural changes. Old age, just like death, is becoming eradicated from social awareness.

### **Key words:**

deconstructing, old age, older people, ageing, the elderly, social transformations

## **1. Introduction**

The fundamental thesis of this article may seem slightly disputatious, bearing in mind the title of the book and the great number of various initiatives undertaken, both scientific and non-scientific, with the term “old age” in their titles.

I am therefore trying to demonstrate that we are dealing with the deconstruction process of old age understood as a certain state or socially defined situation, with particular attributes, standing, status, and identity.

Just as the period of childhood, old age is determined mostly by demographical features and is connected with the biological processes of the body.

And just as children have their specified status, privileges and obligations, so are older people saddled with certain social expectations.

The fact that social expectations regarding the topic of the old age exist is expressed in such proverbs and sayings as, for example: “age is a heavy burden”, “old age never comes alone, but brings many illnesses along”, “youth is cheerful in bloom, old age is wrinkled in doom”.

It is difficult to define old age clearly. It is not an academic problem, but the social connotations are not very specific either. Despite these facts, people discussing old age assume some consensus as to the topic of their disputes (CBOS<sup>1</sup> 2009). When CBOS asked Poles if they think about their old age they did not have problems answering the question. Old age is the final stage of life. You enter it after experiencing all previous stages and with the awareness that there will not be any following stage. Unlike any other stage in life, old age is defined by processes of the living organism, with regard to the perspective of having a body; of the biological nature of our existence. Attempts at determining when the old age actually begins appear in literature in the form of thresholds described with respect to the following dimensions: biology, demography, economics, psyche, and social status, pointing mostly to the occurrence of certain processes characteristic of this stage in life (Szatur-Jaworska 2000). These facts influence the status of older people and social conceptualization of old age.

## **2. The social status of older people in the past – what do we know?**

The place older people occupy in social space is determined by factors similar to those which determine the place of other members of a society. Social standing is connected with the privileges of prestige, access to goods, and power, defining its location in social structure and hierarchy (Ossowski 1982). Margaret Mead and her concept of three cultures connects the standing of older people with the role they play in cultural transmission. This role was of utmost importance in agrarian societies, in which changes occurred over a span of a few generations, and enculturative transmission took place in the form of a direct transmission. Older people, who upheld tradition and formed a personal legislative institution, enabled the societies to last (Mead 2000). But knowledge was not the only resource that guaranteed high rank in the structure of a family and community. Generally speaking, it was the control of resources necessary for maintaining order and survival of a society that defined the standing of older people (and not only older people). In Sparta, a *Gerousia* consisting of 30 elderly male members ruled the politics of the whole city. A similar role was performed by the Senate in ancient Rome, which also consisted of elderly men (Minois 1995). We know from history of some monarchs living to a grand old age. Louis XIV of France lived for 72 years,

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<sup>1</sup> Public Opinion Research Center

Elizabeth I Tudor lived till the age of 70 and Frederick the Great died at the age of 74, similar to our Polish Wladyslaw II Jagiello, who was 72 at the time of his death. Among the ministers, chancellors and marshals appointed during the reign of Luis XIV, at least twenty were over 60 years of age when they took office (Bois 1996). In those times, power was personalized individually (Focualt 1998) and the long lives of the regnant enabled the survival and long-lasting of a society. "The office was not a matter of age but of individuality" (Bois 1996: 75). Back then, in the early modern period, age was not important when it came to serving.

The situation of older people was mainly dependent on their resources and health, which guaranteed secured living and independence. A lack of the aforementioned resources deprived people who were incapable of self-support, due to their old age and poor health, of stable grounds for social security, hence rendering them marginalized and excluded. For example, in the countryside old people tried to work for as long as they could and to be useful, because only then could they hold their position in the family and community. The owners of farms also tried to hold their ownership rights as long as possible and not pass them on to their successors. If this was the case, however, their social standing could have been altered dramatically at times. This is the reason for the custom, upheld until quite recently in rural Poland, of preparing a detailed contract, which specified the responsibilities and obligations of the successor towards their elderly parents or parent. The issue of legacy raised tensions among parents and children. Age enabled people to keep their resources under control and, thanks to the capital they worked for all their lives, it guaranteed access to goods. Young people were only at the beginning of this road. However, on the other hand, processes linked inevitably with the passage of time (such as illness or the death of a spouse) minimized the opportunities of using and managing one's resources. Older people attempted to postpone as long as possible the moment of passing on the ownership rights and the right to take decisions, since it amounted to the deprivation of privileges secured by those rights, and the lowering of one's rank in the family (Bois 1996, Piotrowski 1973).

### **3. The social security system and emergence of the old age**

The industrial age brought along a major change in the position of older people. Previously, old age was not really clearly delineated. The social security and pension systems drew a clear line between working people and people not obliged to report for duty due to their old age. Thereby a clear line was drawn between productive and non-productive individuals. It also defined the symbolic beginning of old age in the social sense. Being a pensioner alters the status of an individual in a very distinctive manner. It also changes said individual's identity. It is therefore not a coincidence that all the criteria of old age assume their threshold point at the beginning of one's retirement.

Old age is present both in academic analysis and in social awareness. When CBOS asked Poles when old age begins, the respondents pointed to the age of 63 and above, which may be the mean value of two pension thresholds – 60 for women and 65 for men (CBOS 2012a). 65 is, or rather used to be, the ‘magic’ border which, once passed, marked the stage of old age with all its appurtenant attributes. When an individual finds him- or herself past this border, he or she becomes entitled to withdraw from the job market and to remain professionally passive; to change his or her form of operation and lifestyle. Becoming a pensioner used to be a ritual for entering the stage of old age. More or less official farewell celebrations at the workplace, where managers and/ or colleagues give the retiree gifts, bear all the traits of a ritual highlighting a change in social status. Since that very moment someone who hitherto had been an employee becomes somebody else – a pensioner; in other words somebody who, according to Znaniecki, deserves repose. The person’s absence from the job market, contrary to that of the unemployed, does not evoke allegations of idleness and living off other people (Znaniecki 1998). In the year 2000 a significant number of retired Poles remained resistant to accepting employment, arguing that “they did not want to work anymore as they had already worked enough throughout their lives” (Halik 2002: 49–50), so they had the right to rest. Passing time did not change much with regard to those statements, as the majority (69%) of pensioners surveyed by CBOS in 2012 were not willing to take a job, either (CBOS 2012b).

#### **4. The fading dichotomy of a productive and non-productive stage in life**

Late modern times are changing this state of affairs. It is reflected primarily in language. The elderly oust the old, also in scientific description. New terms are appearing, such as ‘the third age’ or ‘late adulthood’. The term ‘old’ used to describe a person is beginning to have a pejorative connotation and is best avoided. Right before our eyes social norms are changing, and referring to someone as old is imperceptibly starting to be seen as somewhat unfortunate and indelicate. Consideration given to old age is mostly defined by treating it as a social, demographic or medical problem; a problem that should and can be solved.

The disappearance of old age from social space is connected, generally speaking, with processes of social change; above all, with demographic processes. The average life expectancy in medieval times was 25 years; in the 19th century it was 45 (Trafiałek 2003). In the 1950s the average life expectancy in Poland was 62 years for women and 57 for men. Currently it approximates 72,4 years for men and 80,9 for women. Forecasts estimate that by the year 2035 the average life expectancy will rise to 77,1 for men and 82,9 for women (GUS<sup>2</sup> 2013a).

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<sup>2</sup> Central Statistical Office

Between 1990–2000 the general number of Polish citizens rose by 1,2%. At the same time the number of people aged 65 and above grew by more than 20%. It is estimated that the number of oldest Poles will rise most rapidly. It is predicted that between 2007 and 2035 the number of people above 80 will double (GUS 2009). Old age is beginning to amount to a quarter of life. There are twenty years between the age of 60–65 and the age of 80–85. Factors differentiating the situation of sixty-year-olds and eighty-year-olds are becoming more important than their similarities. It has become increasingly challenging to treat them as one social category in profiles and analyses.

The ratio of individuals of productive age to individuals of post-productive age is beginning to change to the disadvantage of the working population. For every 100 individuals of productive age there are 26,9 individuals of post-productive age. In 2011 in Poland people of post-productive age constituted 17,3% of the entire society, which was close to the number of people of pre-productive age, who accounted for 18,5% (GUS 2013b). Growing concerns about the situation when working people will not be able to bear the weight of supporting the non-working has led to changes in the public pension scheme. The retirement age has been postponed. Regardless of further developments of the debate on pensions and what its outcome may be, one may assume that the borderline between one's job and retirement will simply disappear. Such a forecast is justified by job market observations. The growing flexibility of the job market not only makes it easier for the typical individual to change jobs, but also entails no continuity of employment, periods of unemployment, and illegal employment. Ulrich Beck argues that unemployment will cease to exist as a problem, as it will become a natural state; periods of unemployment will be present in most people's lives (Beck 2002). Simultaneously, we are under pressure, visible also in the government's politics, to undertake individual steps aimed at gathering resources which will secure our well-being when we are old. Seven principles described in a guidebook defining the direction towards which reforms related to the results of aging should be developed, endorsed by OECD, includes, inter alia, such statements as the ones below:

1. Public pension systems, taxation systems and social transfer programmes should be reformed to remove financial incentives to early retirement, and financial disincentives to later retirement.
2. A variety of reforms will be needed to ensure that more job opportunities are available for older workers and that they are equipped with the necessary skill and competence to perform these jobs.
3. Retirement income should be provided by a mix of tax-and-transfer systems, advance-funded systems, private savings and earnings. The objective is risk diversification, a better balance of burden-sharing between generations, and to give individuals more flexibility in their retirement decision (OECD 1998).

We can estimate with high probability that only few individuals will enjoy sufficient financial security to resign completely from gaining resources to support themselves at the age of 65 or 67. The borderline between being professionally active and withdrawing from the job market will blur. The majority of people will undoubtedly try to work for as long as possible. One third of Poles aged 18–45 declared in 2009 an intention to work after having reached retirement age (CBOS 2009). Even now, one out of ten pensioners is professionally active (CBOS 2012b). Resigning from work will become an individual's decision, dependent on many factors. Some will withdraw from the job market at the age of 67, others at 77, and others at 87. The ritual of crossing the border and starting the post-productive retirement period will disappear. The symbolic line signifying the beginning of the last stage of life called "old age" will vanish.

### **5. The social identity of older people or the liquid identity of individuals of various ages?**

The progress of medical science and technology makes it possible to soften or even eliminate the negative consequences of ageing and disease. Cataract surgery and almost routine hip surgeries are only two examples of medical procedures undertaken on a regular basis and alleviating the limitations of the body that used to trouble older people in the past. An old age connected with disease, disorders, impaired agility and dependence on others is being postponed in time. When picturing their old age, respondents surveyed by CBOS expressed greatest fear of illnesses, disability and memory loss, but also of being a burden to others, loss of self-sufficiency and dependence on other people (CBOS 2012a). The former and the latter are closely related. The achievements of medical science make it less probable that the consequences of health deterioration linked to ageing will result in disability and dependence on the assistance of other people. Medical technologies (broadly understood also as medical equipment) such as glucose meters, blood pressure monitors and hearing aids increase the self-sufficiency of ill and old people. Old age, which always used to be linked with physical weakness, potential intellectual deterioration, changes in mental health and dependence on others, is being put off and reserved for late old age, when people are over 80 or even 90 years of age.

Withdrawal from the job market marked the beginning of decreased activity in other spheres of life. Old age meant consent for acting passive. In stereotypical imaginings of old age, two pictures dominated: an old age filled with disease and dependency, and an old age reaping the fruits of successful life (Miszczak 2006, Kawka 2006). In both approaches we observe an alteration in the degree and forms of being active. The post-productive period in life has traditionally been associated with an intensification of religious rituals, gardening, helping one's family (looking after grandchildren, household duties, etc.). Social regulations ordered retired people's lives and determined what kind

of activity was proper or not. It also used to apply to physical appearance. Not so long ago a woman turning 50 started to dress in black.<sup>3</sup> Colour was reserved for the young ones. Nowadays jeans and sneakers are proper dress code both for the young and the old. Margaret Mead observed that living and functioning in post-modern times not only allows you to take advantage of experience and gained knowledge, but also requires that you learn continuously and adapt to a changing social and cultural environment. Technological development not only constitutes a change in the production realm, but is also connected with changes in the realm of social relationships and culture. Communication via electronic media introduces not only a new language but also habits and traditions, flattening distance (just think about the disappearance of formal headings such as “Dear Sir or Madam” and new impersonal forms of greetings that take their place, such as “Good morning” or “Hello”). The internet has become the major source of information, where you can learn about the opening hours of your nearest clinic and sometimes even make an appointment with doctors. It has become increasingly difficult to live without an online banking account or a mobile phone. Merely watching TV requires special skills connected with the seemingly trivial act of operating a remote control. Lack of such skills poses a threat of isolation to an individual. Goban-Klas uses the term illiteracy and directs our attention to the emergence of new criteria of social inequality related to knowledge and the ability to use new media (Goban-Klas 1999). Digital isolation affects mostly old people: only 14% of Poles aged 65 and above use the Internet (Czapiński, Panek 2013). Campaigns undertaken by decision-making bodies at various levels aimed at minimizing the negative consequences of such processes and preventing exclusion mainly takes the form of creating an active role for elderly people in society. Active aging is the fundamental idea defining campaigns undertaken within the scope of social politics. “The word «active» refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, and not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force. Older people who retire from work, are ill or live with disabilities can remain active contributors to their families, peers, communities and nations. Active ageing aims to extend healthy life expectancy and quality of life for all people as they age” (WHO). It is not only social politics and all institutions dealing with elderly people problems and aging that express such an expectation. Remaining active is extorted by social changes.

Collective identity always determines individual identity (Strauss 2013). Age, like gender, is an attributive feature that bears social meaning. When Maria Ossowska analyses ethical norms she begins by noticing the differentiation of social expectations towards people depending on their age (Ossowska 1986). The fact that retirement no longer constitutes a border crossing ritual makes it more difficult to mark the starting point

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<sup>3</sup> Information from my mother and other elderly people

for becoming a member of the category of “old people”. The border which, when passed, started to socially define individuals in different categories and which enabled individuals to perceive and define themselves in a new way, has become blurred and obscured; has ceased to exist. The way people dressed and behaved, and their forms of activity and daily routines were distinctively linked to their age. Social patterns and expectations defined what was generally accepted and desired, and in this way guided individual choices, simultaneously directing them towards fulfilling the social model of an old or ageing person. Nowadays there are no such clear road signs. Living in liquid modernity, as Zygmunt Bauman calls it, does not offer any clear guidance. Liquid modernity means liquid identities. All citizens of an increasingly changing and busy world face the challenge of self-construction (Bauman 1999: 47). Ulrich Beck argues that the law individuals follow today is this is me, and only later am I a man or a woman (Beck 2002: 164), which could be changed to this is me and only later am I a mature or old man or woman.

## **6. Ageing instead of old age**

One of the elements of more general individualization processes is an undermining of the deep-rootedness in social space by affinity to the category of “older people”. It is the individual that holds all the rights as an individual citizen or an employee, and not because of belonging to a broader group, clan, class or nation. The basis for an individual identity’s definition of who an individual is for themselves and others (“I am a teacher”, “I am a mother”) is disappearing. However, the above self-construction is not an individual ‘I’ (Giddens 2001) in the very meaning of this word. An individual, like never before, as Beck states, cannot live a self-sufficient life but is entwined in a network of relations with the market, advertising and experts. Identity patterns are created by the market. In declining the assigned patterns, individuals may seemingly choose by themselves, thereby building their own identity. There are special programmes, projects, and organisations in the public sphere addressed at seniors, which offer them various forms of activity. Old age can no longer be passive; withdrawal into the private sphere is no longer a socially advisable way for older people to function. Active ageing is also the predominant message from the market and culture. Older people, in a much stronger sense than the young, must construct their identity with respect to their having a body and the way it functions; of having a body with physical appearance and agility. The message conveyed by health experts is also clear: remaining active is an effective way of delaying the ageing processes and keeping the body and mind agile and one’s health better. It also means an eagerness to learn new things; accepting novelties and adapting to a changing environment.

Upon analyses of changes that affect old age as a socially defined state, one must not forget that it means entering the final stage of life, followed only by death. Talking about

old age is a reminder of the existence of death. Yet, death has become a taboo in modern societies. It is absent from social space. Terms directly addressing death are being avoided. We say 'he left us' instead of 'he died'. We do wear mourning clothes. Nothing reminds us of the existence of death; of its inevitability. Our attention is directed towards the cause of death, which seems to be avoidable. According to Zygmunt Bauman, the modern period deconstructed death, and the post-modern period deconstructs immortality. There is no death as a social fact; there is only a biological event (Bauman 1998). Do we not observe a similar process with regard to senescence? I feel inclined to say that not only is there no death anymore, but there is no old age either. There is only ageing. "Ageing" focuses on the ongoing process leading to old age, but without a clearly defined ending; without pointing to when exactly this old age occurs. Treating old age as a process is obviously justifiable. A sixty-five-year-old man standing at the beginning of the road is very different from a ninety-year-old standing closer to its end. Their health condition, agility, family and social situation, and the problems they face are totally different. Nonetheless, it causes old age as a state or defined social situation to vanish. The ageing process can be delayed, the flexibility and dynamics of the process making it difficult to determine specific moments and features pointing to the existence of the state.

## **7. Conclusions**

Are we going to see Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* come true – a book where people died without wrinkles and other symptoms of growing old? They were taken away before death so that others could not see them. Are we facing such a future? Being active and participation at various levels of social life obscures the borderline between adulthood and old age. It is a way of alleviating or even eliminating the results of the on-going process of aging, which allows for the negation of old age. Older people used to work for as long as possible, justifying their utility and therefore their existence. Zawistowicz-Adamska states in her pioneering work devoted to old age and older people that "the right to work is their right to live. Idleness portends death" (Piotrowski 1973: 252). Nowadays various forms of activity play a similar role. Maybe people will start to withdraw only when being active is no longer an option, or when they are forced to do so by social pressure. Far away from the mainstream of life, locked in specialized institutions and isolated, they will not remind others of old age. Is it the way it is going to be? Ulrich Beck believes that "long-term conflicts will be preside over «attributive» features, which, both now and in the past, are linked to race, skin colour, sex, ethnicity, (...) age [highlighted by I.T.] and disability. These sorts of social inequalities are «quasi-transmitted by nature» in the environment of advanced individualization and obtain a special organisational and political dimension. It is so because of their inevitability and persistence, their being in contradiction to the principle of success, their specific character and due to the fact that they are

directly recognizable” (Beck 2002: 150). On the other hand, perhaps Michel Maffesoli is right when he forecasts the end of the era of individualism and the beginning of a tribal epoch (Maffesoli 2008). Older people’s communal forms of living are in line with such a forecast (Niezabitowski 2007, Szlendak 2010, Grotowska 2011).

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## **Old age – roleless role or time of freedom**

### **Streszczenie**

Starość – wiek bez roli czy czas wolności?

Starzenie się społeczeństw jest dziś faktem, nie jest jednak jasne, jaki kurs obiorą społeczeństwa w odpowiedzi na to zjawisko. Prawdopodobnie do głosu dojdą będą potrzeby ludzi starszych, wobec których nie pozostaną obojętne instytucje społeczne w każdej właściwie sferze – biznesu, pracy, usług społecznych (w szczególności zdrowotnych i edukacyjnych), kultury, religii. Niniejszy tekst jest próbą spojrzenia na ten proces w perspektywie jednego z elementów struktury społecznej – ról społecznych. Podjęta analiza miała za zadanie wskazanie kierunku przebiegających zmian. Wzięto pod uwagę kilka ról: opiekuna i podopiecznego, dziadka i babci, pracownika, członka wspólnoty religijnej oraz obywatela.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

wiek bez roli, role społeczne w starości, starzenie się, opieka w okresie starości

### **Abstract**

Although today the aging of societies is a fact, it is not obvious which direction societies will take in facing the phenomenon. Most likely, the needs of elderly people will become more visible and social institutions will not stay indifferent and will provide help to those people in almost every area of life – business, work, social services (especially medical and educational), culture and religion.

This paper is an attempt to analyse this process from the perspective of one of the elements of social structure, i.e. social roles. This analysis was to indicate the direction of the above-mentioned changes. Several roles were taken into consideration, namely that of a caregiver and a charge, a grandfather and grandmother, a member of a religious community, and a citizen.

### **Key words:**

roleless role, social roles in old age, ageing, care in old age

Aging not only means a challenge or a problem to be solved, but also points out directions of social change. Population aging results from human activity, i.e. from scientific, technical and medical development, and cultural and lifestyle changes. If the senior population constitutes 10–20% of a society, not only is the elderly people's presence more visible, but diversity and inequality among them can also easily be noticed.

In the personal dimension aging and old age involve changes of social status, roles, and self-identification. One of the first rules an individual learns in their socialisation process is to “act your age”. This rule refers to social diversity in the context of age. It is

related to particular social roles available to a member of society as well as the way these roles are played in various life stages.

This raises questions about the place of senior citizens in society. Their place is defined by social roles. Do any roles referring to old age emerge as a result of demographic changes? How are social roles available to the elderly changing today? This paper aims at presenting a brief review of a basic repertoire of social roles intended for or available to elderly people, and of tendencies in the way those roles change.

## **1. Role configurations**

Just like in other stages of life, the roles played by people in old age also indicate their social age. One's social age expresses social expectations related to specific ways of thinking, acting, perceiving the world, and being treated. These expectations are deemed correct and are disseminated as appropriate for the age in question (Szarota 2010: 42). Such expectations, norms, imperatives, and privileges generate differences related to aging, which are embodied in special social practices.

The appropriate age to undertake specific roles and behave appropriately to one's age is defined by a "social clock", typical for a given community, which constitutes a part of its tradition (Moody 2006: 2). Not always are social roles assumed intentionally; some are taken or lost involuntarily as a result of aging. Becoming the recipient of care as the result of the deterioration of physical strength and loss of economic independence is one such example (Szarota 2010: 42).

Some roles can be assumed only after having reached a particular age threshold, e.g. starting schooling, to exercising active and passive voting rights, obtaining a driving licence, retiring, attending a so-called third age university; others can or have to be given up after having reached a particular age threshold.

Yet some roles can be assumed at any age. One does not give them up when arriving at old age, although the related expectations and ways of fulfilling them change with ageing. In the course of time, the same roles change their forms, weaken or become intensified, and their importance for the individual's social status changes. This is well illustrated by a role of a mother of adult or even aging children in comparison with a mother of little children, or the role of an employee who, as a result of aging, is perceived as less and less effective, less well-educated and holding invalid qualifications, and whose deteriorating health causes problems, etc. Some roles can intensify and their position in the role repertoire can move to the centre, e.g. the role of a member of a religious group, association or local community, the role of a citizen, or that of a patient.

## **2. The gender gap and the problem of care**

Aging is different for men and women. The most obvious difference concerns life span, which is longer for women – the Global Age Watch Index in 2012 indicated that there are 84 men to 100 women aged 60 years (p. 7). However, one can indicate many other features being different for the respective genders.

Women's numerical superiority involves differences in marital status. While elderly men remain married, most women are widows. More often, widowhood happens to women, since they live longer, marry older men, and thus have a lesser chance to remarry. Nevertheless, the consequences of such circumstances for the quality of life at an older age are ambiguous. Some of those who are single at an older age suffer from isolation; others do not. In many cases lonely people live close to their children and families, relatives or other people, as such ties effectively protect them against solitude. However, a lonely life can cause a worse socioeconomic situation, i.e. risk of poverty or social isolation. The spouse's or partner's presence is particularly important in the case of illness or senility, when the continuous support of a caretaker is essential. As a matter of fact, women face the necessity to help their husbands or partners more often than men. Although in modern society an important shift is taking place in relation to the care-taking role, which requires men to engage in housework and raising children, women still have to care for the rest of the family, i.e. their spouses, siblings, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Only daughters are required to take care of aging parents, as they perceive such care as part of their gendered role (Brandler 1998: 44).

But providing care is extremely stressful. It is easier to take on such a burden if the family ties are strong. On the basis of his own calculations J. Remr proposed a typology of caregiving, in which he took into consideration the approach to providing care (the caregiver's satisfaction) as well as the perception of the relationship between the caregiver and the charge. According to the quoted author, 34% of respondents declare caregiving accompanied by good relationships (mostly women and widows). Their assessment of their involvement in care giving was positive, even in the case of conflict with their charges. The second group of respondents (10%), composed mainly of people under 30 years of age and also those who were badly off, felt satisfaction in caregiving despite sporadic conflicts with their charges. The third group (24%) was composed of those whose decision to provide care was based on their relationship with their charges, although they did not experience caregiving satisfaction. This approach can often be observed in the case of men and of persons enjoying higher social status and revenue and having received a higher education. The last group (32%) decided to provide care for a family member, although they declared no satisfaction in being caregivers and no closer relation to their charge (Remr 2012: 212–213).

Like in other European countries, families in Poland are also responsible for providing care for senior family members. Elderly people appraise institutional efforts to

meet their tangible and intangible needs, as provided by governmental as well as non-governmental social services, as poor (Łangowska-Marcinowska 2010: 94–95). Yet, institutional care for the elderly in Poland is necessary for family, social, and housing reasons. According to experts (Karpiński 2008: 232, as cited in Rogala S. 2010: 127) the network of nursing homes which could provide dignified conditions to spend one's old age should be extended tenfold, i.e. from 30 thousand to 300 thousand places.

Elderly people play both roles related to care – they receive help (mostly men as care recipients) and they provide care (mostly women as caregivers, who take care of their parents, spouses and other family members, e.g. parents-in-law). The second role places a great burden on women.

Family relationships are assessed differently with respect to gender. Regardless of gender, senior citizens are satisfied with their grand- and great-grandchildren. In the case of marriage relations, however, men tend to explicitly evaluate their marriages as positive, whereas women may express disapproval (Halicki 2010: 229). The differences in evaluation may result from the fact that women (both daughters and wives) bear greater costs of care than men (Raschick, Ingersoll-Dayton 2004: 320–322). And in the case of aging daughters, their problems only pile up due to the burden of caregiving and ageing (Brandler 1998: 44). Moreover, caregiving is experienced differently by different family members, i.e. daughters, sons, wives, and husbands; generally speaking, children get greater satisfaction from being caregivers than spouses (Raschick, Ingersoll-Dayton 2004: 320–322).

The roles of care-recipient and caregiver are related also to the issue of care for the elderly provided by female support workers, mainly emigrants, who are employed legally or illegally in the countries of Western Europe and Northern America (Tomassini, Lamura 2009: 83–85, Lutz, Palenga-Moellenbeck 2010: 421). The abovementioned data prove how far this phenomenon has spread: it concerns 18% of social care workers being employed in the UK at the moment, and over 50% of migrant workers in London in the system of care provision (Candiano, Shutes, Spencer, Lessen 2009: 1)<sup>1</sup>. In Germany, for instance, the number of employees providing social services has exceeded the number of employees in the automotive industry. And the German government is still planning to increase the employment of cheap care workers from Eastern Europe (<http://www.dw.de/carers-outnumber-autoworkers-in-germany/a-5879436>).

As Lutz and Palenga-Moellenbeck indicate, officially it is the family that cares for elderly people in Germany. However, in the public discourse this issue is described as an "opened secret", for family caregiving is a pretext for employing female migrants. This rift between the official and unofficial family ideology of care was mentioned by a journalist who described his experiences in a book entitled "Where to Put My Father?"

<sup>1</sup> After the enlargement of the EU in 2004 Poland became one of the main country of origin for migrant-carers in the UK (13% of migrant-carers were born in Poland, also 13% in Zimbabwe, 12% in Philippines, 10% in Nigeria, 8% in India) (Candiano, Shutes, Spencer, Lessen 2009: 64).

in 2007. This publication triggered a discussion in the German media and disclosed that the care system for the elderly is in fact based on the work provided by migrants from Eastern Europe. It is worth noting that the book was published anonymously (Lutz, Palenga-Moellenbeck 2010: 422 and *passim*).

In Poland the care system for the elderly does not include migrant care workers and this distinguishes our country from the countries of the old European Union.

### **3. The age of freedom**

In the 21st century, uniform concepts of the course of life for each and every person are fading away. In the very same society one can observe two opposing tendencies; on the one hand, educated and career-oriented women postpone the decision to have children until they are 35 or older, while on the other, teenage pregnancies are being recorded. Thus, a 35-year-old woman can be both a mother and a grandmother. In professional life it is possible to enter a new career path after 60, despite retirement. As these examples show, the course of life is becoming less predictable and the relation between specific social roles with age is diminishing (Moody 2006: 13).

Nonetheless, the social definition of old age is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it is believed that in old age everything is possible – professional work and retirement, parenthood and grandparenthood as well as establishing a (new) family. One's biography becomes uniform and particular stages of life, e.g. marriage, parenthood, or professional life do not coincide exclusively with a particular age, and the lifestyles of all generations become alike (Giddens 2009: 170–171). On the other hand, old age is described as a "roleless role". The most important social roles – family and professional roles – are created for people aged 30-50 and do not meet the social expectations of elderly people. The authority of guardianship that is typical for parenthood roles concerns guardianship over children under 20, and the related expectations of responsibility, control and socialization do not apply to the relationship between an adult and his or her elderly parents. As this example proves, old age deprives social roles of their attributes and power. A similar mechanism operates in the case of professional roles, which disappear or change and gradually stop being sources of power, respect, development, and social rewards after retirement (Hazan 1994: 41–42). In the literature on gerontology an explicit or implicit assumption is made that professional work is a basic type of human activity and a source of human identity. Life after retirement is described using terms such as "leisure" or "roleless role." The first term is used to highlight that retirees, in being outside the labour market, deal with the problem of keeping themselves occupied with sensible and meaningful activities (Shuldiner 1995: 248).

The term "roleless role" refers to the tendency to replace clearly specified and formalised social roles (e.g. that of an employee, spouse or parent) with informal roles

characterised by underspecification and fuzziness; e.g. the role of an employee is replaced by the role of a user of free time.

Underspecification refers also to basic social institutions, in which the division of roles is not strict and the roles themselves are not precisely specified – this generates greater freedom and autonomy. Some experts emphasize the importance of this issue, claiming that old age is not determined by external requirements and restrictions. In this context, old age seems to be a time of more freedom rather than an age of no roles (Moody 2006: 21, Halicki 2010: 121).

It is important to highlight, however, that individualisation and the possibility of introducing innovation to social roles depends more on an individual's character traits, activity, and negotiation abilities. This means that nothing is determined unconditionally and once and for all. Social status, e.g. within a family, is won (and not achieved); thus, the role which has been won can be lost. As a result, old age is a "roleless role" especially if one has no power and resources to continually "negotiate" one's status.

### **3.1. Family roles**

Demographic changes have an impact on family structure. A longer life-span together with a low fertility rate results in the occurrence of *beanpole families*, in which many generations live together. Such families are smaller (Dykstra 2010: 3), and contemporary young people have more parents and parents-in-law than siblings. New social roles appear, such as great-grandparents and great-grandchildren, along with new relationships such as grandparents vs. great-grandparents, great-grandchildren vs. great-grandparents, etc. The family is learning to live with new roles, its structure remains unspecified, and there is no answer available as to who is to take responsibility for what (Qualls 1997: 178). As Turner indicates, nowadays the roles of grandparents are changing into entirely new roles which entail occasional contact with grandchildren, toward whom grandparents are trying to act as good companions in fun rather than figures of authority. Whereas in the past grandparents were in charge of socialising the youngest generation, handing down family values and heritage, today's grandparents put emphasis on playing with grandchildren, playfulness, and informality. There are various reasons for this change. However, it can be argued that the emphasis on the socialising role has decreased due to a conflict inside the family resulting from intergenerational differences in lifestyles. Moreover, the increasing number of divorces and the unclear role of grandparents (in terms of rights and responsibilities) when parents separate make it easier to give up the task of socialisation and focus on playing with children (Turner 1990: 101).

In Poland both academic literature (e.g. Czerniawska 1998: 17, Bieńkowski 2012: 88–89) and social mentality ascribe to grandparents the function of cherishing tradition, the task of telling stories, instilling religious beliefs and a code of ethics, and

emotional engagement with their grandchildren (CBOS 2012: 5, CBOS 2008: 5–6). According to Hazan (1994: 43), it is typical for a grandparent to be emotionally involved but have restricted rights to decide about the grandchild's future. It is a relationship between a grandchild and a grandparent, i.e. a person whose social position is of marginal significance.

### **3.2. The role of an employee**

Social time is structuralised in accordance with the time of paid work, which is the essence of human activity. The number of working hours and the work time schedule in an individual biography depends on social organisation, economic structure, technology, social conflicts, the conditions of social agreement, and institutions. Over the last century working hours in industrialised countries have been shortened (Castells 2007: 437) and the number of working years has decreased. This is accompanied by a stereotypical perception of older employees who are deemed burnt out, afraid of risk, exhausted, and mentally inflexible. In Sennett's opinion these superstitions are not accidental – their aim is to justify the pressure on older employees to retire. Older and experienced employees are less submissive and tend to be judgmental towards their supervisors in comparison to young employees. The professional experience and the knowledge about the company an employee has gained over the course of time can be deemed an obstacle, as opposed to a form of capital, by supervisors who want to introduce innovations (Sennett 2006: 126). Diversified strategies have been used with respect to various groups of employees on the labour market, as seen from a historical perspective. Older employees are tolerated only in periods of prosperity, in which case they are encouraged to postpone their retirement. But in a crisis or recession, as in the 1930s and 1970s, there is a tendency to push them out of the labour market in the belief that only younger employees can develop new skills and production methods (Davidson 2012: 32).

The biographies of contemporary pensioners present the typical capitalist professional experience: a basic social role which required a lot of their time and helped them to build their identity. Hence, retirement can cause numerous negative consequences such as a feeling of worthlessness not only in professional but also in social life, indifference, apathy and passivity (Łangowska-Marcinowska 2010: 86). Despite all of these risks, older employees in Poland exit the labour market before reaching the regular retirement age. Between 1990–2004 the professional activity rate among employees aged 50–55 decreased from 75.6% by 11 percentage points, and among people aged 55–59 it decreased by 15.8 percentage points to 40.6% (Kurkiewicz 2007: 190). Persistently high unemployment in Poland makes older employees seek refuge in retirement (between September 2012 and September 2013, the number of unemployed people aged 50 and over doubled in comparison to the total number of people seeking employment, i.e. by 10.2 % (Kowalski 2013)).

### **3.3. The role of a member of a religious association**

In old age the role of a member of a religious association is of great importance. Old people's participation in church services and payer groups as well as pilgrimages develops their traditional religiosity (Halicki 2010: 74–75). Religious observances are a vital form of senior citizens' activity in organisation, although this does not mean that it is exclusively ritualistic religiosity. There is yet another dimension of institutional religiosity, namely the capability to produce social capital. Many authors noticed that religiosity supports civil participation through e.g. appeals to participate in elections or other forms of political activity in various ways (e.g. Verba, Schlozman, Brady 1995, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Putnam 2008, Wuthnow 1994, Coleman 2003). The research conducted in Poland among senior citizens show that thanks to their membership in communities, organisations, and religious movements they acquire the necessary skills to maintain interaction within a group and through church structures (e.g. Caritas and missions) they undertake charity initiatives not only of local but also global scope. Religion and its institutions create a space in which senior citizens can play civil roles. The interested party itself perceives such activity as valuable – it broadens their horizons outside the limits of their privacy and everyday routine and allows them to engage in activity for a good cause (Grotowska 2011). Playing the role of a religious community member frees a person from a painfully experienced restriction – from a social space shrinking to personal matters and everyday routine.

### **3.4. The role of citizenship**

The increasing power of the so-called grey lobby results from a particular important trait of elderly people, namely their civil activity. In the UK people aged 55 and over more actively participate in elections and shape legislative policy than young people: 33% of people aged 65–74 contacted a local councillor or a member of parliament in comparison to 13% of people aged 25–34 and 4% of people aged 19–24. Senior citizens' involvement is not restricted to traditional policy: baby boomers participate in consumer organisations more often than members of other generations (Davidson 2012: 4). In Poland, however, the relation between age and electoral participation is curvilinear – in 2007 such participation was most important (76.9%) for people aged 56–65, but the participation of people over 66 had decreased to 68.4% (Polish General Electoral Study). Elderly people are also the least active in the public sphere. For instance, 6.9% of those over 65 shared their opinion with local authorities on issues of importance to the local community and 7.7% took part in meetings, whereas 72.9% declared having no influence on public matters and 45% as having no interest in them (Krajewska, Sobiesiak 2012: 5–6). Similar tendencies can be found in charity and volunteer work. Generally speaking, Poles are one of the least active nations in Europe. 12% of people over 55

declare involvement in public matters, whereas the average in EU countries is 27% (however, European involvement is highly diversified, being highest in Iceland at 64% and lowest in Portugal and Greece at 4%) (Pazderski, Sobiesiak-Penszko 2012: 14). In Poland the level of volunteering is relatively low, despite the fact that undertaking such activity in old age contributes to a higher quality of life. Volunteering is important for personal development, as it forms new traits of character in an individual, such as openness to people, courage to act and take responsibility, determination, self-confidence, etc. Moreover, it helps people in following the structuralisation of time into days, weeks and months, and motivates participants to cope with daily life (e.g. getting up in the morning and taking care of themselves); it provides a support structure in keeping oneself psycho-physically fit (Błachnio 2012: 142).

#### **4. Final remarks**

Although today the aging of societies is a fact, it is not obvious which direction societies will take in facing the phenomenon. Most likely, the needs of elderly people will become more visible and social institutions will not stay indifferent and will provide help to those people in almost every area of life – business, work, social services (especially medical and educational), culture and religion. The above-mentioned demographic tendencies enforce transformations in social structure which will meet the needs of senior citizens, who are becoming more and more visible in society. And their needs, which are so different from the needs of children and young people, will be better articulated and universal, and will require that society makes an effort to meet those needs (Dyczewski 1994: 10).

This paper is an attempt to analyse this process from the perspective of one of the elements of social structure, i.e. social roles. This analysis was to indicate the direction of the above-mentioned changes. Several roles were taken into consideration, namely that of a caregiver and a charge, a grandfather and grandmother, a member of a religious community, and a citizen.

The demographical processes and the accompanying social changes are taking place in a particular economic, political and social context, also being the subject matter of the research conducted by Global Age Watch Index 2013. 91 countries were classified for the sake of this undertaking according to such criteria as economic welfare and the quality of life of old people. Poland was 62nd, between Venezuela and Kyrgyzstan and much closer to the countries of the Third World than the old EU (excluding Greece) or Northern America. For this reason I omitted the role of a consumer in the discussion, since I decided that this role is not very important for Polish senior citizens.

The social roles which the elderly people can assume are generally available (with a few exceptions) to all members of society. But it is typical for half of the analysed

roles undertaken in old age to be unclearly formulated and ambiguous. And the related imperatives and bans are now less strict. Thus, such roles lose their characteristic scope of responsibility and power and their social importance and function. This pertains to e.g. the roles of parents, grandfathers and grandmothers, and employees. Although individuals have the possibility of negotiating the way he or she will play them, it is possible only in special cases to win a social position equal to the position of younger generations.

Nevertheless, the analysed roles include three which maintain and even gain greater importance in early old age. The first is the role of a caregiver with respect to one's own parents, parents-in-law or spouse. This role is usually assumed by women and is a significant burden.

The second role is that of a citizen is manifested in a growing participation in political and social life, although Polish senior citizens do not show particular activity in this area. This attitude may result from their difficult material situation, poor health, and low education level.

Institutional religiosity, which provides a space for expression and social involvement in one's cultural environment, gains more importance in old age. The role of a religious community member, on the one hand, is clearly defined by a religious institution, and on the other, it provides the autonomy to choose from available institutions. In religious institutions old age is not deprived of its role and meeting social expectations is not much of a burden.

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## Problems with *starość* (age). On natural and scientific categories

### Streszczenie

Kłopoty ze *starością*. O kategoriach naturalnych i naukowych  
Artykuł poświęcony jest kwestii stosowania kategorii naturalnych w pracach naukowych. Polski wyraz *starość* używany jest w naukach społecznych jako termin naukowy pomimo iż jest wieloznaczny i – co ważniejsze – nacechowany emocjonalnie. Autorka twierdzi, że przywiązanie do tej kategorii opisu wynika nie tylko z dobrze ugruntowanej pozycji słowa *starość* w systemie leksykalnym języka polskiego, ale także odzwierciedla potrzebę skrótowego i obrazowego nazwania okresu życia ludzkiego, który jest zarazem porównywalny do dzieciństwa, jak i względem niego symetryczny. Idea symetrii pomiędzy początkiem i końcem życia ludzkiego pojawiła się w sztuce XVI wieku; przyjęła ją również nauka XIX wieku. Późniejsze ustalenia podważyły zasadność takiego wyobrażenia, mimo to jest ono wciąż silne, a termin *starość* jest nadal stosowany w opisach naukowych.

### Słowa kluczowe:

kategoria naturalna, kategoria naukowa, starość

### Abstract

This paper is devoted to the problem of using natural categories in scientific works. The Polish word *starość* (age) is used in the social sciences as a scientific term, despite the fact that it has retained its polysemy, and, more importantly, is emotionally marked. The author of this paper argues that attachment to this category of description results not only from the well-established position of the lexeme *starość* in the lexis of the Polish language, but it also reflects a need for a synthetic naming of the period of human life which is both analogous to childhood and holds a symmetric relation to it. The idea of a symmetry between the beginning and the end of human life appeared in the art of the sixteenth century and it was upheld by the science of the nineteenth century. Despite having been challenged by the findings of particular human sciences, this imaginary is still strong, which causes the term *starość* (age) to be still employed in scientific descriptions.

### Key words:

natural category, scientific category, age

An individual living in a particular culture and communicating in a specific language functions at the same time in the world of cultural imaginaries. He learns reality, assuming that it objectively exists, by means of instruments developed by culture. The instruments are dependent on specific languages, which means that cultural images of reality may vary significantly from one another. Thus, it is naming that is important. It enables us to separate certain phenomena of the entirety of the surrounding world.

Common, or colloquial acts of naming do not need to be strict. It is enough that they quickly and effectively elicit specific meanings.

Natural languages are the basis for communication in everyday life and in learning. Accordingly, in European culture, the following appropriate categorization models are distinguished: pre-scientific, or in other words natural (which appears both in a general language and in local dialects) and scientific (captured in terminologies). A natural category arises by distinguishing a certain phenomenon from reality, which can then be considered as a model used for recognizing other phenomena. Phenomena are assigned to the same category on the basis of their similarity to a selected pattern. Scientific categories are slightly different in this respect, though. They are established by defining a set of essential characteristics, which are attributed to a particular phenomenon (Maćkiewicz 1988).

In modern scientific descriptions, the lexeme *starość* occurs very often. Accordingly, research conducted in particular disciplines show that the issue of old age is popular and seems to be extensively analyzed. The lexeme *starość* is sometimes used as a scientific category, so it is often considered as a term. However, I think its status is not obvious. The noun *starość* is derived from the adjective *stary* and has long been used in Polish. It has existed in daily language, so it is believed to have an obvious meaning and is appreciated for its economical imagery and vividness. Old age as a category of description combines the aspects of age, health condition, appearance, family and professional situation. Similarly, the comprehensible noun *starzenie się* (*ageing*) depicts the very process, but is still difficult to define. However, it can be argued that it points to the relation between “biological” and “chronological” age (Kirkwood 1999, p. 23).

Researchers are keenly aware of problems resulting from moving natural categories to scientific terminology resources. Natural categories, which are intracultural, or emic (as opposed to etic categories), are important for the studies of a specific culture which uses a particular language, because they let researchers access local ways of perceiving and describing the world (Pike 1954, Harris 1976, Kottak 2006, p. 29). However, if a researcher attempts to describe universal phenomena, or at least those beyond the framework of specific cultures, he needs to free himself from culturally imposed imaginaries — as Émile Durkheim would recommend. Durkheim believed that these *idola* (*notiones vulgares* or *praenotiones*) are dangerous especially in sociology because they create beliefs in things that are mistakenly taken for the things themselves (Durkheim 1895, p 23).

In the reception of scientific descriptions, it is difficult to avoid suggestive imaginaries if scientific terms are formed on the basis of colloquial vocabulary. Kamilla Termińska claims that (Termińska 2009) “When granting the rank of a scientific term to a colloquial word, it is generally its common meaning that is used. The term deprives itself of the polysemy of the word by sharpening some semantic nuance and introducing

others. Pulling the word out of its linguistic environment gives it unambiguity. It does so by defining contexts, that is, entangling it in a theoretic network of syntactic and semantic links different than that of the language of daily communication” (p. 235). It is easy to agree with this opinion, but in the case of words that are strongly emotionally marked it is not always possible. Therefore, it is not the only way to coin terms. Sometimes they are created in an arbitrary manner — symbols, digits or Latin as a “scholarly language” are used; such actions cause the newly coined terms to have a value of universality<sup>1</sup>. One scholar who was aware of it was Rudolf Otto (Otto 1917), when he used the term *das Numinose* (instead of ‘deity’ or ‘god’) in the book entitled *Das Heilige*. The choice of this term allowed readers to avoid deep-rooted imaginaries that might have occurred if the term had been derived from the vocabulary of the German language.

Terms which are derived from the vocabulary of a particular language are not only loaded with contemporary meanings, but also entangled in former meanings. Reaching for the etymology of a word facilitates the reconstruction of its former meanings and their processes of change. According to *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (Boryś 2005), the Polish word *starość* is derived from the Proto-Slavic *\*starъ* meaning ‘stary’. This, in turn, is related to the Proto-Indo-European *\*stā-ro-*, the original meaning of which was ‘strong, powerful, robust, steady, stable’. Over time, a new meaning was attributed to the adjective *stary*: ‘not young, of advanced age’. The lexeme *stary* took the place of the adjective *\*vetъchъ* (meaning ‘old’) inherited from Proto-Indo-European, the traces of which can now be found in the adjective *wiotki*, or ‘flaccid, flabby, lacking firmness, thin, slim’ (p. 575–576, 702). Aleksandra Niewiara, in analyzing the current reading and etymology of the adjective *stary*, pointed out that it has several meanings in Polish. *Stary* means both ‘being many years, old’, ‘of a long life’, ‘bygone’, ‘used, damaged’, ‘obsolete’, ‘stale’, ‘bad’, not fresh’, but also ‘experienced’, ‘having a higher social standing’ or ‘having a higher rank’. It is therefore not unequivocal, and — more importantly — it hides both negative and positive connotations (Niewiara 1995). The etymology and the range of contemporary meanings of a natural category (especially one used as a term) cause it to become untranslatable into the terminological system rooted in another natural language. The Polish word *starość* is not synonymous with the English *age*. They differ from each other not only in contemporary meanings, but also in their etymology. *Age* refers primarily to time — etymologically, it means ‘space of time, eternity’ (Klein 1971), and is derived from the Proto-Indo-European *\*aiw-* ‘vital force, life, long life, eternity’<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Kamilla Termińska delivered a lecture on this topic at the anthropological and linguistic seminar organized by the Department of General Linguistics and the Theory and History of Culture at the University of Silesia in March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*; [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=age&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=age&searchmode=none) It is Aleksandra Niewiara who writes about Proto-Indo-European roots, which convey the meaning ‘old, former, bygone’ (Niewiara 2000). Anna Z. Zmorzanka, in turn, elaborates on the Greek lexis concerning old age (including the roots it is formed on), (Zmorzanka 2011), while Małgorzata Rygielska deals with the image of old age in French (Rygielska 2013).

Durkheim's warning is still relevant, even for research where the category *age* is used with the conviction that it is transparent – as happens, for example, in works devoted to demography and social policy. In such works, one of the main tasks is a striving to pinpoint the threshold of old age. In order to achieve the task, findings from disciplines such as biology and physiology are referred to. However, they do not offer clear-cut solutions. It is assumed (Rosset 1967) that “whatever the answer, it must be concrete. Practically, a certain conventional limit is set, which is required to be correct from the logical point of view and suitable for comparisons on an international scale” (p. 14). In the same work, it is pointed out that old age has several meanings, e.g. it means a stage of life and denotes the aging process of a population (pp. 11–13). The same researcher notes that it had been suggested that the threshold of old age should be set at sixty or sixty-five years (which was related to the retirement age). Yet, he makes a reservation that “In our opinion, the working age or the retirement age should not be identified with old age. The former is primarily an economic category. The latter is mostly a biological one” (p. 16). These considerations suggest a typical tension between what is universal and contextual, i.e. a reference to studies conducted by biologists and physiologists is supposed to show that the lexeme *starość* (*age*) is a universal category (etic one). It denotes a supra-local phenomenon. Yet, at the same time a solution was adopted that was based on a social usage characteristic of only a part of the world. Up to the present moment, this arbitrary solution has been used – older people are those who are 60 or older (see e.g. Kalache 2005) or people over 65 years of age (see e.g. Puchalska 1986). In some studies, no specific ‘thresholds’ are provided. However, data presented in descriptions or tables refer to an age of 60 or 65 years (cf. Peace 2008).

If natural categories are used in scientific publications, allowances must be made for the fact that the lexeme considered as a scientific term (burdened with a specific etymology, history of development and additional contexts) will generate an imaginary confusion. A scientific term should have a strict meaning and neutral character. It seems that the first prerequisite is relatively easy to fulfill, i.e. it is enough to create a proper definition. In the case of old age, it is virtually impossible because it is a multi-faceted phenomenon (Szatur-Jaworska 2000): “The stage of old age is the final stage in human life – starting with the achievement of the conventionally determined »threshold of old age«. It is a dynamic and synergistic relationship of biological and psychological processes, and changes in the sphere of an individual's social activity” (pp. 33–34). The excerpt above highlights researchers' surprising inconsistency in their approach to the phenomenon: if one can talk about the mutual influence of biological and psychological processes, it cannot be accepted that they are associated with the conventionally and in fact arbitrarily adopted threshold of old age. Between biological and psychological factors, there is a network of non-obvious relations: being retired is primarily dependent on the number of years an individual has lived and/or worked, rather than the biological

condition of his body; being a grandfather or grandmother (also roles that old age is attributed to) are not directly associated with age. Still, it is normally people of advanced age that tend to be grandparents. In the light of these considerations, it is worth quoting Szatur-Jaworska's observation: "With the extension of the average life span in developed societies, demographers introduce new – higher – thresholds of old age, tacitly assuming that in a longer lifetime the stage of late maturity is extended, and thus old age shifts to a later age" (p. 35). So, one cannot help but wonder at the fact that Szatur-Jaworska deems it necessary to determine thresholds of old age because she claims they provide solid frameworks for analysis and a clarity of terminology (p. 37).

The distinguishing of old age as a phase of life is caused by a linguistic habit, so it is difficult to operationalize. Furthermore, it is difficult to turn it into a scientific term because, in order to do so, it is necessary to pinpoint the characteristics of the phenomenon of aging and identify the binding relationships between the positions of this catalogue. We know that what is commonly called old age is related (or may be related) to number of years lived, (health) condition, a sense of being old and social roles performed. However, we are not able to indicate direct and clear-cut relationships between these elements.

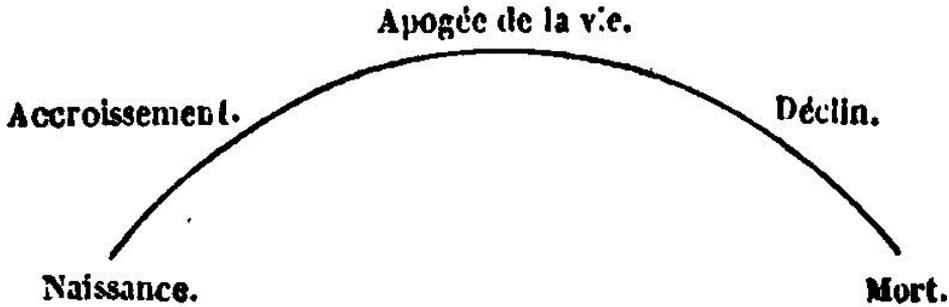
In natural languages, meanings are created in the process of long-lasting accumulations. In the sciences, in turn, terms employed for descriptions should refer to specifically defined ideas. Such terms ought to be conventional, systemic and unambiguous; i.e. determined by strict definitions. They should be neither emotionally nor evaluatively marked, and – most importantly for our considerations – they should be used in specific situations with respect to specific objects (Kornacka 2002). The pre-scientific category *starość* (age) does not meet these conditions.

In the passage cited above, Szatur-Jaworska used the noun *phase* with respect to old age. The term phase means a stage or state in the development of a phenomenon. In world cultures, there is a conviction that human life is divided into stages, which does not mean that for defining the stages one model can be presented. Attempts to determine phases and stages of human life have been made in European philosophical thought since ancient times by Solon, Pythagoras (who also referred to the dynamic idea of growth with respect to youth, and contraction/shrinking with respect to old age), and Plato (Zmorzanka 2011, Jurkiewicz 2011). The Fathers of the Church also believed in the possibilities of indicating phases in human life and they would often refer to the thoughts of ancient wise men (Naumowicz 2011). Life stages were compared to the seasons or periods of the world's existence. This motif also appears in art. Consider the best known examples, *Die drei Lebensalter des Weibes und der Tod* (1510) and *Die Lebensalter und der Tod* (1543) by Hans Baldung Grien. Baldung's paintings present female figures of different ages – the figures' ages are revealed in their nudity. Baldung stresses biological transience and evanescence – change entails the inevitable destruction

of the body. At the same time, yet another representational model appeared. It was popular until the mid-twentieth century and is known as the stairway of life (Hazelzet 1994). The earliest works of this type include Jörg Breu the Younger's *Die neun Lebensalter des Mannes* and *Die neun Lebensalter des Mannes* by Cornelis Anthonisz – both works date from 1540 (Lucke 2008). Such works did not shock one with a view of senile bodies, they did not highlight decay and decline, but still they did not conceal it. In fact, they built a rather calm picture of ascending and descending steps. The earliest representations of the stairway of life showed men, while those created later on depicted women or couples. The stairway of life presented human fate in a symmetrical manner – one step was assigned to every ten years. The prime of life – according to the authors of the works – was forty or fifty years. Interestingly, representations of animals or sometimes nursery rhymes and proverbs were also attributed to particular stages. Douve Draaisma, while analyzing an anonymous representation of this type created circa 1680, noted that the time of descending the stairs (as opposed to the time of ascending) was devoid of joy, hidden in the shadow, gray and monotonous (Draaisma 2013, pp. 8–11). The work analyzed by him did indeed have such an undertone, which does not mean that other variants of the stairway of life were equally depressing. In my opinion, unlike Baldung's paintings which exposed physiology, representations of the stairway of life would rather stress – by means of attire, objects, props and gestures – an individual's place in a group, thus showing roles assigned to people of a certain age.

Stephen Jay Gould claimed that our perception of phenomena is considerably influenced by dominant cultural patterns. The researcher believed that visual metaphors created for the use of science are close to the social beliefs of a particular time. In other words, imagination suggests some familiar forms that people fill in with content, thus constructing ideas about the world. The ancient Pythagorean image of growth (attributable to youth) and contraction (attributed to old age) and the modern representation of the stairway of life (along with the image of going upstairs and downstairs) let us think about human life in a symmetrical manner. The idea of the symmetry of life processes in the nineteenth century was reflected in Herbert Spencer's writings. In the *First Principles* (Chapter 12: "Evolution and Dissolution") the author deals, among other things, with the course of integration and disintegration processes in animals. He shows that the initial phases of their life cycles are characterized by the dominance of integration (when growth takes place), whereas the final ones (when disintegration is prevalent) lead to the destruction of the effects of integration (pp. 283–285). The division of human life into stages does not need to be identical with a belief in symmetry. However, Spencer's vision clearly suggests a symmetry of the initial and final phases of life. I refer here to Spencer because his works (including *First Principles*, published for the first time in 1862) had a vital influence on nineteenth century thought.

The symmetric imaginary of the ascent and descent of human life also appeared in medicine. For example, it can be found in a book published in 1853 by the French physician Joseph-Henri Reveillé-Parise (Reveillé-Parise 1853). The image of a symmetry is constructed by means of descriptions, especially those in chapter two, entitled “Phases diverses de la vie” (pp. 8–12), and via the attached diagram (p. 9):



Reveillé-Parise imagines human life in the form of a curve that rises and falls, thus outlining two main phases — growth and decline. He makes it very clear that what the curve stands for is the idea of life.

Science describes reality by using available models of cognition. Scientists reach for culturally developed categories and models. However, it also happens that these categories and models permeate science without the researcher’s intentional or even conscious intervention. The common way of thinking affects the scientific manner of ordering concepts. Scholarly works often include manners of ordering concepts based on similarity and analogy or contrast, resulting from temporal and spatial adjacency as well as organization based on gradation (Maćkiewicz 2000, p. 108).

I think that what lies behind efforts to search for thresholds of old age is the yearning for analogy and symmetry that results from common thinking. Biologists are aware of the fact that old age is not a mirror image of childhood and youth. In the initial years of human life, there are developmental regularities which are closely correlated with age; that is to say, the younger an individual is, the shorter the periods are when significant biological changes occur. It is relatively easy to determine whether developmental processes are running their proper course, or if for some reason they have been disrupted because their variable time span (for changes running correctly) is short. However, each subsequent stage (no matter how many of them we single out) will be characterized by increasing flexibility arising from a less and less apparent correlation between the temporal and the biological. Nevertheless, we find it difficult to accept some imaginary blur — we want old age to have limits because we believe that it exists. Our language confirms its presence. It is the reverse of youth. Old age is a capacious and non-obvious category. It is attributed to long-lived people (especially to those who do not enjoy good

health) as well as retirees and grandparents. It mixes together both characteristics and attributes. As a category it seems unquestionable; it beguiles us with confidence that it depicts reality, while it is really completely different. We are the ones who try to see it in social roles and years lived by an individual<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss the topic of this paper more extensively in the text entitled „Starość: kategoria naukowa czy wyobrażenie kulturowe” (Gomóła 2013).

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## Are there any attractive names for elderly people in Polish?

### Streszczenie

Mówiąc o osobach starszych, napotykamy trudności językowe, ponieważ tradycyjne nazewnictwo uwypukla cechy, które we współczesnym świecie nie budzą dobrych skojarzeń – starość, nieproduktywność. Nazwy te mają charakter eufemistyczny lub w swojej formie podkreślają wiek osób, przywołują kontekst finansowy (np. obciążenie budżetu), wykazują łączliwość z określonymi czasownikami czy przymiotnikami i są składnikami stereotypowych połączeń, niezbyt korzystnych dla osób starszych. Stąd poszukuje się słów, które w atrakcyjny sposób nazywają tę, coraz liczniejszą, grupę społeczeństwa. Jednym ze sposobów jest wykorzystywanie wyrazów *senior*, *nestor*, które w polszczyźnie istnieją i mają pozytywne konotacje, i nadanie im nowych znaczeń. Dzięki ich stosowaniu następuje przewartościowanie w postrzeganiu osób starszych, uwypukla się ich pozytywny wizerunek, pozbawiony stereotypowych skojarzeń.

### Słowa kluczowe:

osoby starsze, wartościowanie, nazewnictwo, neosemantyzaacja

### Abstract

While talking about elderly people we come across linguistic difficulties, because traditional nomenclature emphasizes those features which do not have positive associations in the contemporary world (e.g. old age and unproductiveness). These names are euphemistic or emphasize people's age; they bring to mind the financial aspect (e.g. budget strain), they collocate with particular verbs or adjectives and they are part of stereotypical collocations which are not very favourable towards elderly people. Thus we are looking for words which denote this increasingly large group of society in an attractive way. One way of doing this is by using the words *senior* and *nestor*, which are present in Polish and which have positive connotations, and by giving them new meanings. Thanks to their use we observe a redefinition in the perception of elderly people and we highlight their positive image, void of stereotypical associations.

### Key words:

elderly people, judgment, nomenclature, neosemantization

While talking about elderly people, we often come across various linguistic difficulties because traditional nomenclature emphasizes those features which do not have pleasant associations in the contemporary world, i.e. old age and unproductiveness, e.g. *ludzie w wieku poprodukcyjnym*, *starzy ludzie*, *starcy*, *staruszkowie*, *ludzie w podeszłym wieku*, *ludzie w wieku sędziwym*, *ludzie* or *osoby w późnym etapie życia*, *osoby po sześćdziesiątce* or *po sześćdziesiątym roku życia*, *najstarsze pokolenie* (*people of post-productive age*, *elderly people*, *old people*, *old guys/oldies*, *people of*

*advanced age, aged people, people or persons in the last stages of their of life, people over sixty, the oldest generation).*

Thus we use euphemistic expressions, e.g. *older people (osoby starsze)*. But who are they older than? Us? We also grow old, which is why this expression is not precise, and why we use less conventional euphemisms, e.g. *człowiek w pełni sił, dojrzały, niemłody, nie pierwszej młodości, starszawy, w pewnym wieku (a person of sound body, mature, no longer young, no spring chicken, an oldish person, a person of a certain age)*. There are names whose very form emphasizes age, e.g. *ludzie w podeszłym wieku, osoby po sześćdziesiątce, osoby po pięćdziesiątce (people of advanced age, people over sixty, people over fifty)*. Numerous words with the root *star-* (*staruszek, staruszka, starzy, starzec, starowina/starowinka, staruch/starucha, ludzie starsi*), bring to mind old age which nowadays is not perceived as an asset. We live in the cult of youth, speed, physical fitness and the pursuit of outer beauty. In turn, the adjective *stary (old)* brings to mind, in contexts concerning lifespan, associations connected with invalidity, destruction and being *passé*. We less frequently use it in connection with the characteristics of somebody who is experienced, familiar and reliable [compare *stary przyjaciel (an old friend)*]. The opposition to youth is emphasized by the antonymy of the adjectives *stary – młody (old – young)* and the phrases *starość – młodość (old age – youth)*.

Some of the names are very long (multiword phrases), so they are not convenient to use, e.g. *ludzie w wieku poprodukcyjnym (people of post-productive age)*. The word *emeryt (retiree or pensioner)* does not refer to playing any positive role in society, and in the context of the discussion about changes in the pension system and demographic data (a low birth rate and the ageing of society) it nearly frightens us. It only brings to mind the financial factor of budget strain. It is worth adding that the word *emeryt (retiree/pensioner)* is often used in the expression *emeryci i renciści (retirees and pensioners)*, which emphasizes the unpleasant associations even more.

Some contemporary words are marked and they cannot be used in every context or every situation, e.g. the informal expressive words *staruszek* and *starowinka (old guy, old girl)*; officially they are people beyond retirement age. Other names are rare and literary, e.g. *matuzalem (of Methuselah)*, which comes in two forms: *matuzalem* and *matuzal*<sup>1</sup>, and is used in the expressions *matuzalemowy/matuzalowy wiek, lata (Methuselah age or years)*. The fact that they are marked is connected with their biblical origin – Methuselah was the longest-lived of the biblical patriarchs.

<sup>1</sup> According to *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego* it is an aged person or the oldest person in a given group of people.

The academic term “*people in late adulthood*”, i.e. people over 55 or 60<sup>2</sup> is not commonly known (outside of psychology) and it can be misleading. In non-specialist texts, adulthood rarely refers to old age.

The late stages of human life connected with the processes of ageing are also metaphorically called *trzecia dorosłość*, *trzeci wiek*, *jesień życia* (*third adulthood*, *third age*, *the autumn of one's life*)<sup>3</sup> or the aforementioned *późna dorosłość* (*late adulthood*), and we say elderly people are *młodzi duchem* (*young at heart*) in order to come to terms with old age, of which we are so afraid. The most common term is ‘third age’ which is part of the term ‘third age university’, but other terms are quite common, for instance:

„Witamy na Kazimierzowskim Uniwersytecie **Trzeciego Wieku**. (...) Jego celem jest aktywizacja **osób w okresie późnej dorosłości**. (...) **Trzeci wiek**, inaczej **późna dorosłość** to wyzwanie nie tyle na dzisiaj, co na przyszłość. (...) Jest to więc światowe wyzwanie – jak żyć **w okresie późnej dorosłości**” (“Welcome to Universitas **Seniorum** Casimiri Magni in Bydgoscia (...). Its objective is to activate **people in late adulthood**. (...) **Third age**, also referred to as **late adulthood**, is a challenge more for the future than for the present. Life expectancy is getting longer and longer. So it is a global challenge – how to live **in late adulthood**”) ([www.ukw.edu.pl](http://www.ukw.edu.pl) – all bolded expressions – I.B.)

In the medical environment there is an expression *ludzie w wieku geriatrycznym* (*geriatrics*), e.g.

„Głównym celem personelu Oddziału Geriatrycznego jest zachowanie maksymalnej sprawności i samodzielności osób w wieku geriatrycznym” (“The main objective of the Geriatric Ward is to maintain the top fitness and independence of **geriatrics**”). ([www.spzoz.jgora.pl](http://www.spzoz.jgora.pl), access 31st May 2013).

Outside of medical contexts this term can be perceived as negative, as it is connected with illnesses<sup>4</sup>, e.g.

„Upadki w **wiekui geriatrycznym** zaliczane są do tzw. wielkich problemów geriatrycznych. (...) Celem niniejszej pracy była analiza czynników zagrożenia upadkami i urazami **osób wieku geriatrycznego** w aspekcie wczesnej prewencji w środowisku zamieszkania seniora” (“**At a grand old age** falls are classified to be serious geriatric problems. (...) The objective of this study was to analyze the risk factors which can lead **the geriatrics** to fall and get injured in the aspect of early prevention in the dwelling environment of a senior citizen”). (*Upadki i urazy wieku geriatrycznego* „Studia Medyczne” 2008, 9, 77);

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<sup>2</sup> There are differences in marking age limits: according to Z. Wiatrowski, late adulthood is 50–65, whereas old age is over 65. The WHO divides old age into 3 stages, called advanced age (60–75), senility (75–90) and ripe old age (90 and older) (Kettner 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Levinson was the first person to use this metaphor; He described adulthood and its stages by means of the four seasons.

<sup>4</sup> Since geriatrics is concerned with ‘the diseases of old people, their treatment and prevention’ (Dubisz 2003), and the adjective ‘geriatric’ is derived from the noun ‘geriatrics’, what does the expression ‘geriatric people’ mean? Is it people who are prone to the diseases of old age?

„Osoby w wieku geriatrycznym stanowią 16,5% polskiej populacji. Zmiany involucyjne towarzyszące starzeniu przekładają się na niewydolność wielu układów”. (“The geriatrics constitute 16.5% of Polish population. Involutional changes which are part of the process of ageing result in the insufficiency of numerous systems”). ([dnl.gumed.edu.pl/20148.html](http://dnl.gumed.edu.pl/20148.html), access 31st May, 2013);

or with the slang meaning of the lexeme *geriatria* which is pejorative, e.g. *sama geriatria w przychodni, nie można się dostać do lekarza (an overheard complaint) (The clinic is full of geriatrics, one can't even make an appointment!)*.

Unofficially, elderly people are also called *babcie*, *dziadkowie* (especially in the medical environment, e.g. in hospitals and clinics (*babcia z piątki, dziadek pod oknem, a babci co dolega?*). Those terms are considered by many elderly people as a form of discrimination, downgrading their value and depriving them of the fullness of humanity. I am ignoring here expressive terms (e.g. *ramol, piernik, próchno, grzyb, sklerotyk, zgred, stare pułdo, moher, wapniak, antyk, dziadyga* and numerous vulgarisms), as I concentrate on communication in the public sphere, in which, according to etiquette (linguistic politeness) and political correctness (which often replaces linguistic politeness) it is not acceptable to use the language which insults the interlocutor or the listener. It is also worth mentioning that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century some cultural changes took place. It is not the grandparent who passes on the skills and knowledge to their grandchild, but the other way round – it is the grandchild who passes on the knowledge to their grandparent or teaches them a skill<sup>5</sup>.

Such experiences are a source of frustration for the older generation accustomed to a different style of functioning in familial, social and professional relations (e.g. the relationship between a student and his/her instructor). Stereotypically, we attribute computer illiteracy to elderly people. We also assume they do not understand computer terminology, which is to a great degree the result of neosemantization, i.e. giving a new meaning<sup>6</sup> to words which are already in use – as illustrated in the following cartoon:



I grabbed the mouse and closed the window. What am I supposed to do now? (Google Images: elderly people, found 11th May, 2013)

<sup>5</sup> See A. Grybosiowa 2008, Skudrzyk 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Neosemantization can take place because of foreign languages, and our mother tongue (see Markowski 2005: 165, 215–231). The two examples window and mouse are interesting, because their new meanings developed in English, and later they were transferred to Polish, but their metaphorical meaning can also be justified in Polish. One needs to add the new meanings differ significantly from the old ones, that is why the youngest generation may find it difficult to understand the mechanism for the change in meaning.

In view of the presented imperfections of current nomenclature, we are looking for words which can denote this increasingly large social group in an attractive way. One way of doing this is to use words which already exist in Polish and have positive connotations, e.g. the words *senior* and *nestor*. Thanks to their use we observe a redefinition in the perception of elderly people, and a positive image, void of stereotypical associations, is highlighted.

It is connected with the basic meanings of the words *senior* and *nestor*. Let us have a look at their dictionary entries:

**senior** 1. literary a) the oldest member of a family (a father, a brother), b) the oldest or the most senior member of a team or a community, 2. sport a 19-year-old competitor, 3. history a) in Poland divided into several duchies: the oldest of the Piast dynasty to whom the local princes were subordinate, b) in feudal law: a feudal lord providing care for his subordinate vassal (Dubisz 2003);

**nestor** 1. literary the oldest, the most experienced, distinguished representative of a group or community who enjoys widespread respect (Dubisz 2003; entry translated by Anna Borówka).

We cannot forget that Nestor is also the name of a mythical king, the oldest and the most experienced Greek leader from Troy, the hero of the *Iliad*.

Thus by using the nouns *senior*, *seniorka* and *nestor* especially in plural (*seniorzy*, *nestorzy*), one evokes the positive associations connected with the meanings of the words *senior* (providing care, experienced) and *nestor* (the most experienced, distinguished, enjoying widespread respect), the literary and/or lofty markedness of these lexemes and their cultural aspect and collocation, especially the respectability of certain collocations<sup>7</sup>: *senior rodu*, *rodziny*, *senior polskich literatów*, *seniorka rodu*, *zasłużona seniorka polskiego pielęgniarstwa*, *nestorka polskiej sceny*, *nestorka polskiego aktorstwa*, *nestorka rodu architektów*, *nestorka podlaskiej farmacji* (*family patriarch*, *the doyen of Polish writers*, *family doyenne*, *distinguished doyenne of the Polish nursing*, *the doyenne of Polish actors*, *a doyenne/veteran of the Polish theatre*, *the matriarch of a family of architects*, *the doyenne of the Podlesie pharmacy*).

So we can read and hear about *kluby seniora*<sup>8</sup> (*clubs for senior citizens*), *akademie dla seniora* (*academies for senior citizens*, e.g. *Nowohucka Akademia Seniora*), *dni seniora*<sup>9</sup> (*senior citizens' days*), *portal seniorów* (*a social platform for senior citizens*, e.g. [StarszakiPlus.pl](http://StarszakiPlus.pl)), forums and websites for senior citizens (*forum50+seniorzy XXI wieku*, [bycSeniorem.pl](http://bycSeniorem.pl)), *stowarzyszenia dla seniorów* (*senior citizens' associations*) and *problemy seniorów* (*the problems of senior citizens*), we come across newspaper

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<sup>7</sup> The examples of the collocations on the basis of dictionary and corpus data (Dubisz 2003, NKJP, search engine PELCRA, access 16th April, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> The collocation registered in *Praktyczny słownik współczesnego języka polskiego* (Zgółkowska 1994-2005).

<sup>9</sup> In two meanings: 1. a celebration held in honour of the oldest inhabitants of a place, 2. a discount for elderly people on a given day of the week (e.g. in shops and hairdressing salons).

supplements entitled ‘senior’ ([www.dziennik.krakow.pl/magazyny/senior](http://www.dziennik.krakow.pl/magazyny/senior)), we watch commercials of loans (Bank Pocztowy), there are post office accounts called *Nestor* (for senior citizens – compare [www.pocztowy.pl](http://www.pocztowy.pl)). The market offers products, services and goods for this age group: *educational programs for seniors, holidays for seniors, counselling for seniors and education for seniors*. There are also books and articles about the policy of the state towards seniors, the forms of spending free time and about the activity of seniors. These books and articles describe the needs of senior citizens. In these books and articles the word ‘senior’ is also used e.g. *Encyklopedia seniora (A senior citizen’s encyclopaedia)* (Borsowa et al. 1986), *Seniorzy w rodzinie, instytucji i społeczeństwie (Senior citizens in the family, institution and society)* (Fabiś 2005), *Polski senior a społeczeństwo informacyjne (Polish senior citizens and the information society)* [Tomczyk 2008].

There are numerous computer and internet manuals for senior citizens which have the word ‘senior’ in their titles, e.g. Gunter Born’s set of manuals, published in Poznań (NAKOM Publishing House) in 2008: *Internet. Łatwy start dla seniorów, Komputer. Łatwy start dla seniorów, Komputer – notebook (laptop) – netbook. Poradnik dla seniorów młodych duchem* and *Komputer dla seniora: dla nieinformatyków* (2009, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Szkolne PWN) and many others<sup>10</sup>.

In the mean time, most Polish language dictionaries do not register the new meanings of the words *senior* and *nestor*. It is only Halina Zgólkowa in *Praktyczny słownik współczesnego języka polskiego* who provides the expression *klub seniora* and the adjective *senioralny (senior)* in the new meaning along with the example *senioralny wiek*. The English word *senior* could have influenced the formation and the consolidation of the new meaning.

The words *senior* and *seniorzy* have been in use in sociology for years and they are also used by some state institutions, e.g. it appears as frequently as the expression *ludzie starsi* (older people) on the website of Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej (The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy). The word *senior*, usually in plural, appears in 113 documents, and the phrase *osoby starsze* (older persons) in 37 documents, but with a higher frequency within one text<sup>11</sup>. On the website of The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy other terms for older people can be found: *trzeci wiek, osoby powyżej 50 roku życia, osoby 50+, osoby w wieku 65+, osoby dorosłe z najstarszej kategorii wieku, osoby w starszym wieku, osoby starsze, osoby najstarsze (the third age, people over fifty, people aged 50+, people aged 65+, adults from the oldest age category, old people, elderly people, the oldest people)*.

On that website the adjective *senioralny (senior)* can be found. It appears in a new meaning that Polish language dictionaries do not provide, namely ‘concerning elderly

<sup>10</sup> See Burkacka 2011.

<sup>11</sup> The data based on the excerpt carried out on the 12th May, 2013.

people', e.g. Departament Polityki Senioralnej (Department of Senior Policy) or Centrum Inicjatyw Senioralnych (Centre of Senior Initiatives), see:

- „Na podstawie Zarządzenia nr 68 Prezesa Rady Ministrów z dnia 16 sierpnia 2012r. utworzono – Departament Polityki **Senioralnej** w Ministerstwie Pracy i Polityki Społecznej” (“On the basis of the directive number 68 of the Prime Minister issued on the 16th August, 2012, the Department of **Senior** Policy was formed in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy”).
- „Departament Polityki Senioralnej odpowiada za tworzenie i rozwój kierunków działań skierowanych do **seniorów**, warunków dla poprawy systemu wsparcia **seniorów**, realizację zadań w obszarze aktywnego starzenia się i innych form współpracy wewnątrz- i międzypokoleniowej z udziałem **seniorów** oraz monitorowanie wdrażanych rozwiązań” (“The Department of Senior Policy is responsible for creating and developing the directions of activity aimed at **seniors**, the conditions of improving the system of support for **seniors**, the accomplishment of assignments in the area of active ageing, and other forms of cooperation within the generation and between the generations, with the participation of **seniors**, and also monitoring the implemented solutions”) ([www.mpips.gov.pl](http://www.mpips.gov.pl), access 12th May, 1013).

A different practice can be observed on the website of Ministerstwo Zdrowia (The Ministry of Health). Here the words *senior* and *seniorka* appear in the traditional meaning, namely ‘a distinguished person’, and the term *ludzie starsi* (*elderly people*) prevails. The medical term *ludzie w wieku geriatrycznym* (*geriatric people*) is also used. The fact that words have a great power and can have positive or negative associations is supported by comparing two expressions: *Dom Seniora* (*Seniorów*)<sup>12</sup> (*nursing home*) and *Dom Starców* (*old people's home*). The first one has a neutral or even positive connotation, whereas the latter does not evoke any positive associations, both because of the use of the word *starzec* (*old man*), which will be discussed later, and because of some cultural notions connected with old people's homes – all the more so because residents being beaten or psychologically abused are frequent topics of intervention television programs.

The existence of similar associations can be seen in other examples. The collocation *aktywni seniorzy* (*active senior citizens*) does not surprise us, whereas the collocation *aktywni starcy* (*active old people*) is surprising, as a *starzec* (*an old man*) is aged and long-lived. Let us have a look at some established features of an old man, collected on the basis of corpus data from a balanced stylistic subcorpus, and taking into account a source of statistical validity, the NKJP (National Corpus of Polish Language).

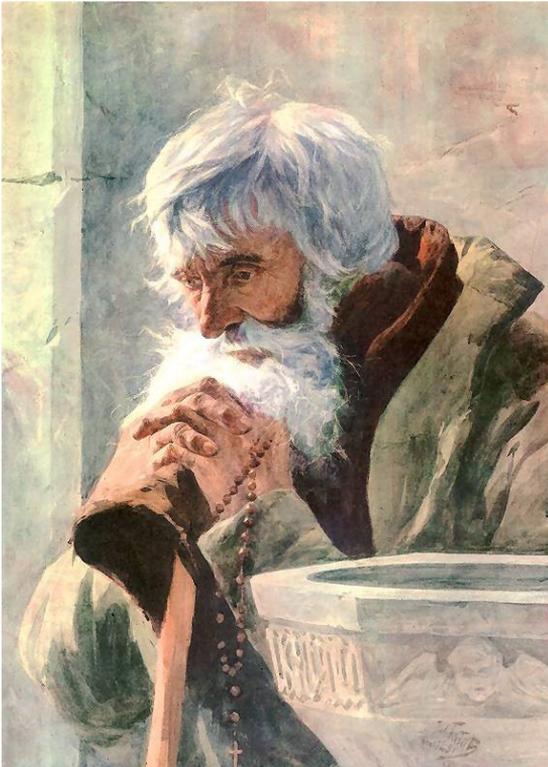
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<sup>12</sup> A nursing home is not only a place where elderly people meet, but it is also a place where they live, so it is (probably) the former old people's home.

And so an old man is:

- *zgrzybiały, zgarbiony* (*decrepit, stooped*)
- *siwobrody, białobrody, siwowłosy, białowłosy* (*grey-bearded, white-bearded, grey-haired, white-haired*)
- *osiemdziesięcioletni, siedemdziesięcioletni, stuletni, sędziwy, wiekowy* (*octogenarian, septuagenarian, centenarian, aged, long-lived*)
- *wysuszony, kościsty, pomarszczony, chudy* (*dried-up, bony, wrinkled, thin*)
- *niedołężny, zniedołężniały, kaleki, schorowany, chory, ślepy* (*infirm, clumsy, invalid, ailing, blind*)
- *lubieżny, obłeśny* (*lecherous, repulsive*)
- *zgorzkniały, ponury* (*embittered, gloomy*)
- *biedny, samotny* (*poor, lonely*)
- *dostojny, czcigodny, świętobliwy* (*dignified, venerable, pious*)
- *święty, mądry* (*saintly, wise*)

so it corresponds to the image which appeared on the first page of Google Grafika (Google Images) for the entry *ludzie starsi* (*older people*), which can prove the compatibility of iconographic images and stereotypical language collocations, compare:



[Google Images: older people, found 11th May, 2013]

It is hard to consider the word *starzec* (*an old man*) as neutral and suitable for talking about contemporary elderly people, who are not always decrepit and grey-haired.

Searching for collocations of the word *starzec* (an old man) with verbs did not bring unexpected results. Normally, old people *siedzą, uśmiechają się, szepczą, wzdychają, wstają, przerywają, milczą* (sit, smile, whisper, sigh, stand up, interrupt and remain silent). A lot of verbs refer to the activity of speaking: *odeprzeć, rzec, spytać, odpowiedzieć, powiedzieć, opowiadać* (refute, ask, reply, say, tell, talk). The verbs *leżeć, iść, brać, mieszkać, wyglądać, widzieć, dać* (lie, go, take, live, look, see, give) form collocations with the noun in question less frequently.

These contexts point to quite a static presentation of old people's activity. Let us have a look at some collocations of verbs with a different phrase, namely *ludzie starsi* (elderly people).

According to the corpus data, elderly people

- they go to the café, they come to meetings, they go to the pharmacy, they buy dog food,
- they show a certain characteristic e.g. they are helpless, lonely, hurt, happy, demanding, they are like children,
- they have problems, something more to say, connections,
- they say,
- they can spend time in an active way, exercise, have problems, fall ill, enjoy their free time, meet other people, can be robbed, etc.

It is worth mentioning that there are a variety of collocations and verbs which refer to movement (come, exercise, meet, spend time in an active way). Simultaneously, according to the data from the same source, they say, remember, talk, have (various habits, the right, problems). By choosing a name we instantly tag, we limit some spheres of activity; it does not only concern the activity of speaking, which both old men and elderly people are entitled to. A great deal of certain notions and linguistic and cultural connotations have arisen around old phrases. They can make it difficult to change the existing stereotype (or rather two stereotypes: an energetic old man and a venerable old man).

In an MA seminar I asked my seminar students what image of an old person emerged from commercials. The seminar students pointed to different illnesses (urinary incontinence, problems with the prostate and potency, flatulence, indigestion, migraines), problems with joints (limited mobility, getting tired quickly) and memory. It can be said that the commercials of products for elderly people emphasize stereotypical images of elderly people and they concentrate on their health, the necessity of taking care of the oldest generation, and sometimes they even distort the traditional image of an elderly person (an armchair, a book, a walking stick, fairy tales, grandchildren). Seldom, in order to surprise the viewers, very fit elderly people appear in commercials (e.g. a commercial for Mrągowska™ buttermilk). Here both the selected music and the acrobatics seem highly inappropriate.

In another, more recent group of commercials<sup>13</sup> elderly people are shown in the context of poverty, insufficient livelihood, or realizing their dreams (e.g. dreams about cooking or travelling), death and funerals (death insurance, funeral benefits, reverse mortgage and so on). Here the main objective of old people's activity is to gain financial security and to make sure their children will receive financial help after their death; the wish to not burden their children with funeral expenses. In these commercials we do not hear any words denoting old people (there are words such as *husband* and *mum* and the expression *at any age*) so we get the message by means of the image.

An equally negative, though varied, image of elderly people emerges from the research of Małgorzata Potent-Ambroziewicz, who did research on how high school students view old age. It is worth adding that the researcher herself, in a two-page introduction to her work, calls older people *seniors*, *a generation of old people*, *grandparents* (while talking about the contact between teenagers and their grandparents) and she calls old age *a ripe old age* and *a late stage of life*.

It should be emphasized that words describing elderly people attractively and positively do exist and they are really necessary. These are metaphoric expressions (conventionalized metaphors): *third youth*, *third age*, *the autumn of one's life*, *late adulthood*. There are also euphemistic expressions such as *elderly people*, and the new meanings of the words *senior* and *seniorka*. Polish language dictionaries should take note of the new meaning of the word *senior*. It is very common, it is necessary, and it is used in academic writing, e.g. sociology, medicine and in a lot of official documents. It has no negative associations. A great advantage of the word *senior* is its economy of style: it is a two-syllable word. This word is also the root word of the adjective *senioralny* (*senior*) (also in its new meaning), which makes it easier to form terms of which a great number are actually noun-adjective expressions.

On the other hand, the word *nestor* in its new meaning and its feminine form *nestorka* are compliments in character (that is why they can be found in advertisements, marketing, etc). Elderly people are a growing social group, and the fact that they have financial means (they receive their pensions regularly) makes them appear attractive as potential customers.

It is worth making sure that while noticing the problems of the oldest generation and writing about them, we do not stigmatize elderly people. We all should be allowed to choose the name which will be appropriate for a given situation and person.

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# **Privacy, intimacy and home**



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# Potential of elderly persons – from homeland to home abroad<sup>1</sup>

## Streszczenie

Potencjał seniora – od domu rodzinnego do domu na emigracji

Celem opracowania jest ukazanie potencjału seniorów w prowadzeniu gospodarstw domowych swoich dzieci i w opiece nad wnukami, a także roli ludzi starych w powiązaniu z procesami migracji ich dzieci. Jest to analogiczna rola w opiece, którą realizują na rzecz wnuków w kraju albo za granicą, w zależności od tego, kto jest uczestnikiem emigracji. Jednak w sytuacji ograniczenia sprawności, sami stają się odbiorcami opieki, najczęściej w kraju pochodzenia. Czy uzyskują wystarczającą opiekę?

## Słowa kluczowe:

ludzie starzy, potencjał seniorów, opieka, migracje

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the potential of elderly persons in managing their children's households and in taking care of their grandchildren, as well as the roles of elderly people in connection with the migration processes of their children. Their role is analogous to the one which they assume when taking care of their grandchildren either at home or abroad, depending on who the emigrant is. Yet, in the case of reduced mobility, they become the recipients of such care themselves; most often in their country of origin. Do they receive sufficient care?

## Key words:

elderly people, potential of elderly persons, care, migration

## 1. Introduction

For many reasons, elderly people were not connected to any significant social problems. First of all, this was due to their constituting a relatively small group within the population as a whole. The average life expectancy was low, mainly due to high infant and youth mortality, but also due to general quality of life which, along with low levels of hygiene and underdeveloped medical services, were not conducive to a long lifespan. This does not mean that there were no elderly people, however, it was rather the exception to the rule. Such people were considered to have rich life experience and

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their authority was respected. Both their close relatives and other members of society took their advice seriously. However, their primary place in life was their family home, as their families made most use of their life experience. With time, they took over the roles of other family members, while their families maintained them as there were no pension systems. Additionally, the relation between elderly people and the rest of the population took the form of neighbours' presence on the one hand (e.g. past acquaintances and unconventional treatment methods) and control in cases where they were looked after by their family on the other. In many cases such control was a special stimulus, but also a form of support in caring for the elderly person in question. As recently as a few decades ago when the percentage of population in post-productive age (60/65 years) was low but rising, the issues of elderly people in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, were ignored. Legislative and organisational solutions for this group were insufficient. For this reason, some problems arose. More and more frequently, the previous traditional participation of the whole family in carrying for the elderly person, as well as the participation of the local community, started disappearing. The system of informal and formal care that was carried out by the family and guaranteed by the state administration and local authorities got weaker and weaker. The consequences of this situation was demonstrated in the expert analysis of the Polish Gerontological Association in the 1990s. It said that "in many environments, particularly rural ones, the situation of disabled elderly people is dramatic. They die in solitude and negligence, because of insufficient financial resources, personal abilities and social aid" (Halicka, Pędich, Szatur-Jaworska, 1996). Elżbieta Trafiałek made similar observations a few years later: "The living conditions of elderly people in Poland, their fitness level, access to health care services, recreation, culture, education and other facilities did not satisfy their needs – for years they were worse off than for their peers from Western European countries and North America. Intercultural comparisons justify the thesis about the deprivation of their needs" (Trafiałek 2003). At the same time, the stereotype of elderly people as poor and in need of care was being strengthened (Kołodziej 2006, Miszczak 2006).

In the present analysis I do not undermine the conclusions drawn by these authors. However, I would like to reveal the well-preserved potential of elderly people and the areas in which they are used for the benefit of the family.

## **2. Trends and prognoses**

The dynamics of ageing have gained momentum recently. This is particularly evident in many European countries where the population of elderly people rose from 46 million in 1950 to 112 million in 2000, i.e. from 8% to 12%. The estimations anticipate further increase. In such countries as Italy, Greece and Sweden the percentage of elderly

people in 2000 were as high as 18.2%, 17.3% and 17.2% respectively (Agencja... 2010). Given this situation, the problems of population ageing exceed individual, family and local solutions – they require systemic solutions and bear evidence to the existence of a global care deficit (Isaksen, Devi, Hochschild, 2008).

At the same time, it should be emphasised that the problems primarily concern rich countries, mainly in Eastern Europe. Canada and the United States are affected much less. On the one hand, the problems are the results of population aging in rich countries. On the other hand, in poor countries, with much higher birth rates and fertility, the estimated life expectancy of people born in 2000 is 40 years or less (Zbonikowski 2001), whereas in Poland the expected life expectancy of people born in 2004 is 70.7 years for men and 79.2 years for women (Rocznik Statystyczny 2005). The detailed analyses that also lead to the conclusion that in Poland “living until old age is becoming more common, since 40% of men in their 60s and 60% of their female peers live until the age of 80” (Szukalski 2006). On the other hand, the problems arise from the fact that certain changes are taking place within families (Kawczyńska-Butrym 2008). Their care-giving potential is decreasing. Families are growing smaller and busier and are occupied with their own activities (such as work and studying). What is more, families are more mobile: they are on the run, looking for knowledge (internal and external educational migrations) and work (local and international labour migrations).

Similarly in Poland, even though the processes were not so abrupt, the percentage of elderly people in the population is growing. In 2007 the number of people over 65 was 5.13 million, which constituted 13.5% of the total population in Poland. It is estimated that in 2035 elderly people will make up 23.5% of the population (8.36 million).

The reasons for this situation are not only a decrease in natural growth and the number of children in families, and an increase in life expectancy, but also the migration of the young generation, which factor needs to be strongly emphasised. As was anticipated a few years ago by Elżbieta Trafiałek, “the baby bust and mass outflow of the young population to European labour markets will radically change their [elderly people’s] professional and social status” (Trafiałek 2006). Migrations, both internal and external, are characterised by high dynamics, and thus the changes that are triggered are also of large social impact and significantly influence individuals and families. As statistical data shows, elderly people of post-productive age also participate in migration processes. It is interesting why and when this happens. It is also important to know what their roles are in the migration processes. Is there any relationship between their place of residence and their role in the family: do their roles change with relation to people who are not involved in migration themselves or through their children, and if so, how? On the one hand there is the question of whether elderly people’s solitude and care deficit are influenced by their children’s migration. Consequently, is it necessary to support elderly people and migrating families that are involved in giving care to those people? What’s more, it is necessary to pay attention

to the social capital of elderly people who, whether they are involved in migration or not, contribute to the well-being of their families, local communities and society (Philips 2001). Both issues concern areas of research on migration involving elderly people and their roles, which are not yet sufficiently recognised.

### **3. Elderly people – their roles after retirement**

Let us first look at elderly people's activities after retirement. People of post-productive age can be divided into a few categories, depending on their tasks and roles after retirement. One should remember that this division is to a large extent related to whether the elderly people in question have families, children and grand-children and whether they live near or far away from their families; the latter possibility preventing direct involvement in their families' activities. Division into the respective categories depends on permanent relations and involvement with the family, lack of relations and engagement in the family's daily duties, or incidental participation in the family's life. The latter may include those who live on their own. However, this is not the only criterion of division because there might be many more indirect variables that influence categorisation. The situation may also be changeable and dynamic due to relatives' decisions, current life situation and changes in place of residence.

Among the people who are not engaged in family life there is a group of elderly people who feel useless, dispensable and marginalised. They can be called passive or withdrawn from active life. Some of them think they have finished their professional careers and have earned their pension. They think that they can rest and nobody will make them work for other people, because they have already worked enough and now they have every right not to be active. They limit their social contact and activities, they neglect their physical activity and limit their intellectual activity to watching television programmes. There is also another category of pensioners, namely active people who use their time to pursue their plans, hobbies and passions. Many of them consider this time as "re-gained", when they can take care of their intellectual and spiritual development, social contact, physical activities and health. They search for means to complete their plans. This is why local societies undertake certain activities which are aimed at generating various opportunities to activate people who are withdrawn from professional life. So-called Universities of the Third Age, local senior citizens' clubs, parish groups and even day-time welfare houses are the most important institutions that activate elderly people in their interests, needs, well-being and fitness (Miszczak 2010).

There is also another group that many authors pay attention to. The group is made up of pensioners who actively participate in their families' lives, first and foremost, in helping look after households and/or looking after grandchildren. Even though women traditionally looked after children, grandchildren and households, in the last few decades

both functions, particularly care of grandchildren, are more and more frequently taken over by men. Through engagement in professional work, improving qualifications and promotions, people of productive age experience problems in fulfilling many of the basic functions of the family. Even though they can deal perfectly with their material/money-making function, they may experience difficulties in caring for and raising children, as well as other household tasks. This is why they are willing to use their elderly parents' direct support in daily chores. One of the most important duties which are performed by elderly people is looking after the youngest members of families, namely their grandchildren. Grandparents' involvement in looking after and raising grandchildren (Kukołowicz 2001) as observed in families, is termed "parentelisation" of the elderly generation. This means that grandparents frequently take over parents' roles in the upbringing and daily care of grandchildren.

When we focus on the clearly profiled task of presenting the situation of an elderly person, known in Economics as people of post-productive age, we cannot forget about two coexisting potentials, namely the potential of the elderly person and the potential of the family which is traditionally considered as the main care-giver to an elderly people (Bień 2006; Błędowski, Pędich, Bień, Wojszel, Czekanowski 2006).

One should remember that for obvious physiological reasons, the physical potential of an elderly person deteriorates with age: their bodily systems and functions get worse. However, there are other attributes of the capital they have gathered throughout their lives – life experience, intellect, prudence and distance to daily chores. There is also emotional capital which, in the case of preserving family bonds, is based on love and attachment to children and grandchildren. Moreover, in Poland, many poor families use their elderly family members' accumulated financial capital, such as their pension, which is obtained regardless of the state of their health or their place of residence (which could be with the family, alone, or in a welfare house) (Miszczak 2006). However, the scale of such financial support and the scale of help elderly people provide in looking after their grandchildren by when their children work are not known. Consequently, their influence on the growth of social capital is also unknown, as is the contribution of people of post-productive age to building economic, social and educational capital as well as care-giving, and to the well-being and quality of life of families, and at the same time the general well-being of the society. Some light on the problem of the efficiency of people of post-productive age is cast by an analysis of elderly people's participation in migrations.

#### **4. Elderly people – roles in migration**

Elderly people are not the main participants of the migration process and are consequently often ignored in research on migrations, even though this does not mean that they are not noticed in the process (Castles, Miller 2009). Generally, they are not the ones

to make decisions about migration or define the destinations. However, this does not mean that they do not take part in migration. Their participation may be passive or active, which also determines their role.

**Elderly people play a passive role in migration** when they do not change their place of residence or life and thus cannot be considered migrants. It is their children and/or grandchildren who migrate. Although they remain in place, they participate in different situations which are related to migration and its consequences. It seems that while making decisions about migration, elderly people's children count on their parents' support, such as taking over tasks they will be unable to complete while away.

The actual tasks taken up by elderly people depend on a number of factors. First of all, it depends on who goes to work and who stays at home; on whether the mother leaves while the father stays with the children, or vice versa. In both cases, the senior citizens take up supporting, auxiliary and complementary tasks to the duties of the parents who stay at home. The main responsibility for children and the functioning of the household falls on the parent who stays at home, rather than on the senior citizen who does not participate in migration. However, responsibility for and engagement in everyday tasks are not the same thing, especially when it comes to care of grandchildren. In the case of the migration of mothers, most of the work is done by the grandmothers who stay at home. This is the role which is played by elderly people who participate in migration in such a way.

The situation is totally different when both parents migrate and leave their children with grandparents, or when a child is brought up by a single parent who leaves and does not take his/her parents with him/her. Then, not only the range of chores and duties but also the entire organisation of the household changes and broadens and includes contact with schools and other institutions. More importantly, the entire burden of responsibilities falls on the elderly people in question. In some cases this means that the grandparents cannot cope with the children's problems which may require the decision of a legal care-giver, e.g. in the case of hospital treatment, operations, etc. For this reason, a need arises for formal acceptance of the senior citizen's responsibility for the children in question, in the form of a foster family. Then the elderly person's role, responsibility and participation in direct care for the children left behind by their parents broaden. Even though parents/mothers are in touch with their children via telephone or the internet in what is known as trans-cultural parenthood/maternity (Szczygielska 2013), the responsibility for daily chores as broadly understood fall on the grandparents. In research conducted in Latvia, among other countries, it was concluded that out of over 9.000 children who stayed at home while their parents worked abroad, around 28% of children were looked after by their grandparents (Salaseviciute 2008). This situation shows significant dedication and effort on the part of senior citizens in migration processes, although they do not participate directly. At the same time, this reveals the role of elderly people,

without whom not only decisions about migrations but also the mitigation of the effects parents' migration have on their children's upbringing and care would be more difficult. Although grandparents seem to be unable to deal with all of their grandchildren's problems, it is impossible to undervalue their efforts and dedication to their children.

**Elderly people play an active role in migration** when they actually cross state borders and move (temporarily or permanently) to another country, independently in the framework of the so-called family reunion. As the sparse available research on the topic emphasises, this depends on the category, sex, and marital state of the senior citizens in question (Kałuża 2007, Lassota 2007). Data from 2005 allows one to estimate that 34.858 people from Poland aged 65+ and 19.484 people aged 60–64 left the country for a period longer than 2 months – i.e. in total 54.342, including 33.263 women and 21.082 men (Rocznik Demograficzny 2005).

A few situations that cause migration of elderly people can be enumerated:

- when they, due to their own economic difficulties, make decisions to work abroad and go there for labour – this concerns only those who retired early and relatively fit and young pensioners;
- when they join children who temporarily or permanently live abroad in order to help them look after young babies and in their households, in which case their fitness level may be relatively lower than in the case of senior citizens who migrate independently. This reveals a new outlook on the concept of a global network of care, which assumes that when women travel abroad, other women take part in care-giving in the emigrants' families (Carling 2005);
- when they leave because their children want to provide them with care in the destination country and want to be close to their parents because of their present or future health problems;
- when they are a group of migrants who aged while abroad. However, this group constitutes a separate category, as they made decisions about migration in different periods and for different reasons while still young, unlike others who made such decision while already old. Only some of them decide to return to their motherland.

In the first case, the senior citizen's decision regarding labour migration tends to be determined by the financial situation in their children's families. Financial difficulties and expenditures which cannot be covered by the family's income trigger elderly people's decisions to leave for work. This happens when they conclude that gains from their migration outweigh resultant losses and that their own migration is a better solution than their adult children's migrating with children. Interviews that we conducted a few years ago with Polish women who worked in Italy revealed cases of elderly women working as *badante* (women who care for elderly people in their homes), and

the reasons for migration included organising a granddaughter's wedding or financing a grandson's education (Migracje... 2008).

The second migration situation of elderly people mainly concerns but is not restricted to women and is an exact transformation of the previously presented model of helping parents, in the context of children and their family's migration to another country. In this case nothing changes: they care for the children and take care of the household, but they do this abroad. It is only the social situation that changes drastically. They are in strange, unknown social and cultural space and live in an unknown place. They are isolated because of a lack of neighbours and acquaintances, and often because of a lack of language competence. They are deprived of social contact and dependent almost entirely on their family, especially during the initial period of their stay, before they make new acquaintances and get to know the area where they live. In the meantime, their grandchildren grow older and their presence is no longer necessary. There is no research revealing their future situation – whether they return home or stay abroad.

Finally, the third situation occurs when elderly parents are “brought” to a foreign country so that they are not left alone in the country of origin and so that their children can look after them in the destination country. This concerns elderly people who, according to their children, are or will soon be unable to live on their own without care, primarily due to poor physical condition or health. In this case the largest extent of social isolation and dependence on the family is observed. It seems that elderly parents are not frequent “brought” to foreign countries. This is due to the very high costs of medical care in the Western countries which Polish people choose as destinations. Financial reasons mean that many migrants are unable to provide their parents with care in the destination country. Equally often, elderly parents do not agree to leave their country. This is why children who migrated search for solutions in Poland by paying for temporary or permanent nursing care or another care-giving institution for their parents (such as a welfare house or other care facilities). The third situation represents a completely different role of the elderly people in question.

## **5. Conclusion**

In a traditional family roles and obligations were clearly distributed between generations. Currently in many families elderly people also realise their traditional care-giving roles towards the youngest and medium generation. However, in subsequent periods of life, as physiological ageing processes advance, their range of activity decreases. With time their role changes from that of an active care-giver to that of a passive care-receiver. At the same time, the younger generation displays a high migration mobility, which enlarges the generation gap. Who makes decisions regarding family or institutional daily life and care? Is it elderly people themselves, or their families? If so,

what do these decisions concern and what decisions are made when the people in question are away from their children and grandchildren? This raises another set of questions: In what way do families deal with the tasks at hand and do elderly people obtain the help they need, whether they are passive or active participants of their family's migration processes?

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# The sexual aspects of intimacy in old age, in the public and private spheres<sup>1</sup>

## Streszczenie

Seksualne wymiary intymności w prywatnej i publicznej przestrzeni starości

W naukach społecznych coraz wyraźniej akcentuje się zagadnienia dotyczące seksualności jako wymiaru jakości życia w okresie późnej dorosłości oraz starości. Celem artykułu jest refleksja nad aktywnością seksualną seniorów w kontekście starości biologicznej, podmiotowej i społecznej, w oparciu o czynniki obiektywne (wiek, stan organizmu), subiektywne (poczucie bycia starym) i społeczno-kulturowe (stereotypy, społeczne przekonania).

W artykule istotne miejsce zajmuje część badawcza, przedstawiająca jakościowy opis indywidualnego i pozornie nieprzekazywalnego doświadczenia intymności i seksualności kobiet i mężczyzn w starszym wieku.

## Słowa kluczowe:

starość, seniorzy, kobieta, mężczyzna, aktywność seksualna, intymność

## Abstract

The sexual aspects of intimacy in old age, in the public and private spheres

The subject of sexuality as an aspect of quality of life in late adulthood or seniority is receiving more and more attention within the social sciences. The purpose of this article is to reflect upon sexual activity among senior citizens in the context of old age – understood biologically, individually and socially, based on objective factors (age, condition of the body), subjective (the feeling of ‘being old’), social and cultural ideas (stereotypes, social convictions, public opinion). The research segment plays a significant role in this article; it provides a qualitative description of the seemingly indescribable individual experience of intimacy and sexuality among elderly women and men.

## Key words:

old age, senior citizens, woman, man, sexual activity, intimacy

## 1. The sociocultural image of asexual old age

Modern civilization, which is comprised of societies that are old and ageing, yet are saturated with the cult of youth, try to remove senior citizens and old age from the sociocultural field of view (Jakubowska 2009). The result of the ageing process is treated as unattractive and therefore different from the preferred, dominating ideal.

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The marginalization of old age is largely caused by the ubiquitous obsession with youth, health and physical power. There is no place for the acceptance of the “old, sickly and unsightly” among the images of the “forever young and beautiful”. Marcus Tullius Cicero’s (1963) dissertation regarding old age mentioned four reasons why people mostly consider old age an unhappy stage of life. “It moves us further away from active life, lessens our physical strengths, deprives us of all sensual pleasures, it is close to death” (p. 19). This idea has not lost much of its validity since ancient times. The culture of consumption puts emphasis on youth, vitality, individualism, ability, success and control – traits which are not attributed to old people.

Ageism, or discrimination based on age, is associated mostly with negative views and stereotypes regarding senior citizens which are widespread in society. Polish public opinion polls show that perception of old age is negative; that Poles are afraid of old age (Omyła-Rudzka 2012). The process of ageing is identified with unattractiveness and physical ugliness; it is also framed in the context of dementia and infantilization. Old age is assigned many negative traits, e.g. increased reflexivity, being overbearing, having outdated values or a tendency to criticize one’s surroundings (Kapała 2006).

For centuries, in Western culture, the sexuality of senior citizens has not been a point of interest and sexual activity in this phase of life was treated as an oddity or even pathological, because it had no place in the accepted and preferred social order. The dominant view was that sexual activity requires one to expend lots of energy and so it must be limited in order to preserve health and longevity. Sex was long associated with procreation; therefore the inability to procreate automatically disqualified a person as a sexual partner. Any sexual behaviour not connected with procreation was classified as pathological (e.g. masturbation and homosexual, oral and anal sex). A common conviction was that post-menopausal women do not feel sexual needs, lose their ability to orgasm, sex has less significance for them than for men, etc. In the case of older men, sexual activity was tolerated only when in marriage with a woman who is still fertile (Lew-Starowicz 2012).

Ideas about sex during old age are usually accompanied by surprise and disbelief. A senior citizen cannot be an object of desire because according to popular culture models he/she is not sexy – that attribute would sooner be assigned to young girls (“Lolitas”) than older women. The asexuality of old age stems from an obsession with sex, associated with beauty, health, youth and vitality. Old age on the other hand is usually associated with dependency, helplessness, passiveness, ugliness, sickness and death.

## **2. A reflection of sexual activity among senior citizens in research surveys**

The shift in attitudes toward the sexuality of elderly people is connected with the social changes in western culture which took place during the late 1960s, commonly referred to as the “sexual revolution”. Since the 1990s the interest of social researchers

in the sexuality of senior citizens has grown. Alfred Kinsey's report published in 1948 stated that older people are unable to remain sexually active. Later research, conducted in the 1980s and 1990s on a representative sample group aged 50 to 93, brought the conclusion that most respondents are sexually active and (especially men) declare a connection between sexual activity and satisfaction with life (Brecher 1993). In many research polls gender is a significant variable which differentiates senior citizens in their sexuality. In the *British Medical Journal* from 2010, American researchers proposed the introduction of a new term – SALE, or “sexually active life expectancy”. This value differs significantly between the two genders, when compared with average life expectancy. For men, sexual activity is 10 years shorter than life span. In the case of women, the difference between SALE and life expectancy is nearly twice that and can be up to 20 years, because women live an average of 10 years longer than men. In the 75–85 age group there are still many more sexually active men than women. But many of the women in this group are widows with small chances of a new relationship. Only half of them are satisfied with their sex life and few admit that they think about sex regularly (Tessler Lindau and Gavrilova 2010).

Part of the older population displays a high degree of sexual activity in informal relationships, or LAT cohabitation (“living apart together”). This choice comes from the need for financial and territorial independence (Hooymann and H. Kiyak 2011). So far, the little research regarding older gay and lesbian people in formal or informal homoerotic relations (between elderly LGBT persons) show a high level of sexual satisfaction and the positive aspects of partners ageing together (Heaphy 2007).

Polish reports regarding Polish sex life highlight the fact that senior citizens are sexually active and are much more satisfied with their sex life than is commonly assumed. Mature and older men, more often than their female peers, report regular sexual activity (e.g., Izdebski 2012; Izdebski 2011; Lew-Starowicz 2005).

Some modern surveys show that senior citizens devote more time to sexual activity than representatives of the younger generation. Research conducted on representative samples in western countries shows that one in three surveyed 70-year olds reveals various forms of sexual activity (masturbation, caressing or petting and sexual intercourse), while one in thirty declares daily sexual activity in old age (DeLamater and Karraker 2009). Researchers who focus on the elderly point to the formation of a new stereotype – the “sexy oldie”. At its base is the idea that sexual conduct is an expression of healthy, ideal old age, that sex at that age is pleasant and an expression of true love and that in some cases complete sexual performance requires medical intervention (Gott 2005).

Worldwide, a large percentage of 70- and 80-year olds think about sex and miss it. The research conducted clearly concludes that sexual activity promotes health and longevity, has pain-relieving qualities, improves quality of life, reduces the risk of circulatory

disease, depression and tumours, and mobilises the immune system. For men, sexual activity reduces the risk of heart attack, stroke and prostate disease, and increases levels of testosterone (Lew-Starowicz, 2012).

### 3. Areas of the sexual intimacy of senior citizens in qualitative research

It is only possible to describe sexual intimacy after a very thorough review of individual cases. For the purpose of this article I will present a small portion of research results, which are part of a wider empirical analysis. Qualitative research conducted in Warsaw from 2003 to 2011 had the objective of finding varied analytical material in the area of defining intimacy. The research process consisted of three stages: collecting definitions of intimacy, individual interviews, and focus groups regarding a chosen aspect of intimacy in adult partner relationships (Bieńko 2013). As the result of a “snowball strategy”, 1130 women and men aged 19–89 took part in the three research stages.

Analysis of chosen statements, only from people who were 60 or older and took part in the first two research stages, will be the basis for conclusions included in the article.

As the results of research I conducted show, both men and women of early and later old age emphasize the huge role sex plays in building intimacy: *Sex is that burst of passion, the road to intimacy, closeness, open love, security, where there is permission for all the senses, desire (531/k [kobieta, woman] /84)<sup>2</sup>; Intimacy is of course a sexual release, for me it's also a pleasant kind of stress, arousal, an experience full of fantasy and frivolity, indecency with effort, screaming, pain, sweat (946/m [man]/75).*

Experiencing sexuality is the key motive for striving for intimacy; sexuality becomes a tool which serves to test the limits of human capabilities. In the women's interpretation, sex more often means *tenderness and refinement (864/k/63)*. In the interpretation of men, sex is treated more objectively: *Sometimes sex, erotic intimacy, is easier than being close with someone. My grandmother was right, she said that sex sometimes replaces intimacy (415/m/73)*. In the statements of men, the main associations are desire, instinct, libido and carnality: *I break into fifty pieces then (809/m/70)*. Men more often talk about sex directly, as physical activity, while women describe it as magical, a matter of destiny and mystery, which is connected with certain traditions, values and taboos, (...) *something which I pursue, without understanding it (294/k/73); Everything that we do, just the two of us (...) flirting, conversations about our sexual fantasies, crossing boundaries, for example showing yourself to your partner in a provocative outfit, bought only for him – an act of playful exhibitionism (307/k/64)*. More often for women than for men the love act is *hidden, shrouded by mystery, embarrassing, and therefore intimate (234/k/76); Intercourse was always a bit mystical for me (354/k/79); What happens in*

<sup>2</sup> The symbols in parentheses next to statements are the codes for each surveyed person: the numbers indicate the order in which the interviews were conducted/the subject's gender/the subject's age.

*the bedrooms of old timers is a real mystery. You don't talk about it with your neighbours, what would people say? Impossible! You still do that?!... (327/m/69).*

According to the surveyed, intimacy is expressing oneself through the physical, carnality, the art of giving and receiving bodily pleasure: *It's being one body, even the insides (...)* Intimacy is sharing the space of our bodies inaccessible to others **(215/m/60)**. Intimacy, in one of its aspects, is the key to developing the realm of the senses. The surveyed rated touch highly as an element of intimacy. The amount of satisfaction received from touch is proportionate to the openness and readiness to express personal emotions; to activeness in interpersonal contacts and satisfying relations. The frequency of tactile contact does not decrease with the age of the surveyed: *Touch is an intimate, primal language of love; extensive physical contact can be soothing for both young and old, like a natural sedative. The touch of human skin, even if old and wrinkled, is very intimate (183/m/66); We feel intimacy through our skin, we all need a tender, caressing touch from our loved ones, no matter how old we are (362/k/74).*

Intimate relations break into short-term, episodic meetings, creating a micro-reality of intimacy: *a call during the day with a short "I love you", giving each other compliments, having meals together, caressing without expecting sex right away. (...) These are usually the small things that may seem insignificant in the moment, but nothing brings people closer together than a mutual, simultaneous experience. Sex can be a ritual of intimacy, too (32/k/64).* For older interviewed participants, intimacy is the essence of normality. Its important elements are everyday interactions, significant due to the engagement of the partners: *Intimacy is like burning a bonfire together. Everyone has to add something to the fire (32/k/64) Intimacy is showing closeness in the form of hugs or holding hands, sharing laughter, embracing while watching television, doing dishes together after a meal. Even though these are not sexual activities, they help build intimacy (38/m/83).*

The surveyed married couples speak about a well-worn intimacy: *Step by step the partner becomes familiar, even homely. After a couple decades the relationship may become more worn, less sexy, but it does not mean we don't look for that glint in the eye – and it's thanks to that developed intimacy (28/m/69); Our marriage is becoming a little 'absent-minded'. (...) we end up in the bedroom alone, the grandkids are asleep. "What should we do?" we think with excitement. But after a while, we're both asleep. (...) Sleeping together, without sex, can be intimate in its own way (23/k/71).*

As the results of the research I conducted show, both men and women in old age consciously and carefully work on building intimate relations in long-term relationships. They try to maintain the emotional closeness and not forget the physical aspect of being together. In the second half of life sexual desire usually decreases gradually. Less frequent intercourse is effectively compensated for by other forms of activity and non-sexual forms of expressing emotions, love, tenderness, closeness and attachment.

The respondents believe that one can experience sexual pleasure at any age. The image of sex and the erotic, in the respondents' statements, is an openness to emotions, which penetrates the senses.

#### **4. Modern anti-ageing sensibilities in the image of the sexuality of senior citizens**

The sex life of older people is gradually being treated less as something sinful and shameful. We observe an increasing average life span and a growing population of people interested in being sexually active in old age. Research is conducted regarding "quality of life", which also takes into account the sexuality of the elderly, while mass culture promotes a healthy lifestyle and activeness among senior citizens. International research associations are dealing with anti-ageing strategies and a satisfying life model, which includes sex life.

Until recently there has been talk of a "double standard in ageing", different for women and men. According to Bartosz and Zierkiewicz (2005), it is still a characteristic of femininity in Poland. Although older men are perceived as being "in their golden years", an older woman is treated with tolerance and patronizing leniency. Meanwhile, thanks to exercise, cosmetic procedures and diet, older women are often more healthy and age better than their male peers. Popular culture argues that one can enter old age without radically losing physical attractiveness. The media construct an image of ageing women who keep the right to publically display their nudity. American actress Sharon Stone appeared topless on the cover of *Paris Match* in August 2009, with the provocative title, "I'm 50, so what!". Helen Mirren, a British actress, feels sexy and wears a bikini, despite being 65 years old. In 2000 in Great Britain, a calendar featuring nudes of older women caused a sensation. Profits from sale of the calendar went to charities which help fight leukaemia. In the 2007 Pirelli calendar, one of the models in a erotic photo shoot was 76 year-old Sophia Loren.

Modern 50 year-olds say that "50 is the new 30". The term "silver surfer", used to describe grey-haired adventurers, stopped applying exclusively to men. Women are becoming more confident in expressing their sexual desires in the public sphere. Erotic stories for older women, called "porn for mums" are popular worldwide (e.g. James 2012). Their intimate life does not end at 50. Not long ago the press wrote with sarcasm and disbelief about movie stars' relationships with partners many years their junior: "the star and her toy boy". Today, retired teachers searching for a partner place ads in the paper with erotic propositions. "Before I turn 67 – which will be in March – I want to experience lots of sex with a good man" (Juska 2013). Then there is the romance of a British divorcee with a man over thirty years younger, which was turned into a book and became a worldwide bestseller. The star of the scandal claims openly that she meets

regularly with three different men, says she is too old to play marriage and values her freedom. The only loss she mentions is a rib broken during passionate sex. All this, over 100 years after Princess Metternich (2012) was asked at what age a woman loses her sex drive – to which she replied, “Ask another, I’m only sixty” (p. 395).

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## **Non-heterosexual ageing**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł dotyczy lesbijek i gejów w starszym wieku, którzy są kategorią niedoreprezentowaną w społecznych badaniach obszaru LGBT. Ponieważ respondenci do badań często rekrutowani są w klubach i barach bądź za pośrednictwem Internetu, konsekwencją tego jest przewaga w roli badanych osób młodych bądź w wieku średnim. Ponieważ jednak procesy starzenia się współczesnych społeczeństw zachodnich nie omijają populacji osób LGBT, badania tego obszaru stale się powiększają. W artykule najpierw dokonuję przeglądu współczesnych badań związanych ze specyfiką starszych gejów i lesbijek. Są to tylko dane zachodnie, gdyż w Polsce nikt jak dotąd ową problematyką się nie zajmuje. Następnie przedstawiam wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania starszych osób w polskim środowisku LGBT. Na koniec prezentuję ilustrację problematyki z obszaru literatury, czyli wizerunek gejowskiej starości w powieści Michała Witkowskiego *Lubiewo*.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

lesbijki, geje, starzenie się

### **Abstract**

The article concerns elderly lesbians and gays, who are an underrepresented group in social research in the area of LGBT issues. Since respondents for research are often recruited in community clubs and bars or via websites, the majority of interviewees are young or middle-aged. However, research in this field is steadily increasing, since the ageing of modern western societies pertains also to the LGBT population. In this article I firstly review recent research related specifically to elderly gays and lesbians. These are only western data, as no work has been done on this issue in Poland so far. Next I discuss selected aspects of elderly people's functioning within the Polish LGBT community. At the end of the article I present an illustration of the issue taken from literature, i.e. the image of gay ageing in Michał Witkowski's novel *Lovetown*.

### **Key words:**

lesbians, gays, ageing

## **1. Elderly gays and lesbians in research studies**

Research concerning non-heterosexual senior citizens is based on the assumption that members of this sociodemographic category can be characterized with certain shared traits. Their specificity consists of the combined consequences of minority status and being vulnerable to double discrimination due to their orientation (homophobia) as well as age (ageism). The first research into this community emerged at the turn of the 70s and 80s. It concerned mainly males and referred to two rival ideas, namely

accelerated ageing theory and crisis competence theory. Accelerated ageing theory assumed that gays consider themselves old earlier than heterosexual males, which may be a source of many emotional or social problems. According to certain researchers, some gays already defined themselves old at 30 (Berger 1982). On the other hand, crisis competence theory pointed out that gay men deal with the consequences of the passage of time better than their heterosexual counterparts. It is explained in terms of the necessity of reflexively constructing one's identity during various phases of the coming out process, which conduces to the acquisition of adaptive skills. The outcome of the minority status is thus related here to higher endurance and adaptability. In this perspective, homosexuals develop during their lives traits such as plasticity in gender roles, competences connected with building social support networks (e.g. via the "friend as a family" model) and efficiency in negotiating meanings. Those skills result from the necessity of managing stigma and are treated as conducing to positive engagement with the challenges of older age.

Proponents of the accelerated ageing theory state that the gay community is based on a cult of youth, vitality and carnality. Some point out the important role of sex and sexuality which is bound to an emphasis on physical beauty and fitness. Robert Schope (2005) writes about a change in the perception of ageing among gays, which occurred in the West in the 1960s when the gay movement and infrastructure officially started to develop. Before that, when the homosexual community was based on informal social networks, elderly gays enjoyed respect. They were sometimes sponsors or those who introduced young gays to the gay subculture. When this world "surfaced", official clubs, bars and discos were established and instead of experience and resources, youthfulness and psycho-physical abilities to absorb new sensations began to matter. Tailoring an entertaining infrastructure chiefly to the needs of young people resulted in the isolation and stigmatization of the elderly.

Contemporary research on the opinion of gays on the specifics of the ageing processes of non-heterosexuals illustrate diverse situations and views. Peter Robinson (2011), drawing on interviews with 21 gays aged 40 to 79 from Australia and the US, highlighted two major and four minor narrations which concern how, according to the respondents, elderly gays are perceived in the LGBT community. The major narrations oppose each other. The first is based on the belief that the homosexual environment is one where ageism reigns and an obsession with youthfulness permeates. Some interviewees treated it as a consequence of a gay lifestyle and the expression of "a gay image". The author also noted opinions on a trend among elderly gays of insistently trying to look younger than they really are. The second narration, however, accented the positive experiences of respondents as a result of relations with younger gays. Interviewees talked about the youth looking with admiration at long-term and lasting relationships between older men. Sometimes they appreciated their life experience and eagerly

listened to stories of homosexuals in the 1960s or 1970s. The two major narrations above find continuance, or rather follow-ups, in four minor narrations. The first is about the respect with which young gays sometimes treated older ones. They perceive them as veterans who had lived through the hard times, including the AIDS epidemic. A few respondents add, though, that respect depends on the older gay's position. If he had a low social position and did not manage to achieve career success, he may have been marginalized. The second narration relates to paid sex. Here a theme appears of relations between the youth and the elderly where money plays the main role. According to the authors of this kind of narrative, older gays can only be attractive to young ones when financial rewards come into play. In that case, the younger party can even display emotional commitment to the relationship, but it would have been impossible but for the money. The subject of the third narration is teenage ageism. Here, respondents mention sociocultural ignorance among young gays who are mostly uninterested in the past and do not perceive the elderly as people to whom they owe something in the context of emancipation. They treat them like grandfathers with whom they have no common ground. The last minor narration accentuates the image of elderly gays as sexually unattractive and aggressive. The elderly are often seen as potentially harmful, with the aim of sexually abusing those younger than them. From an analysis of the interviews, the author draws a few general conclusions. According to him, the dominant culture constructs ageist models which are just being reflected by gay subculture. Modern gay identity is connected with youthfulness. As a consequence there are phenomena such as a perception of the elderly as asexual, efforts on the part of middle-aged gays to maintain a youthful image (in terms of look and behavior) and older men's difficulties in accepting the consequences of ageing. The diversity of the collected narrations indicates that there is no universal model according to which the elderly are perceived in the gay community. According to respondents, an older gay may be marginalized but may also be treated with respect.

Illustrations of feelings connected with ageing were presented by Adrian Lee (2004) on the basis of unstructured interviews with 15 homosexual males aged 57 to 84. In their perception of the process, interviewees referred mostly to physical changes and carnality. They also talked about health issues, changes in bodily appearance and mobility possibilities. Decreasing libido and changes in sexual functioning were mentioned as well. In areas related to the specifics of sexual orientation, the theme of a gay infrastructure appears. Respondents spoke about clubs drawing mainly young people. They claimed that they did not go there because of two reasons. Firstly, they felt uneasy and uncomfortable there, and did not fit in. Secondly, certain things favored by the young, such as harsh lights and loud music, were less well-tolerated by older people. One of the interlocutors reminisced about having felt his age severely for the first time at the so called "picket line" (an alternative name for "cruising ground", i.e. a conventional public place

to search for a sexual partner), where he encountered offensive remarks from other men who found him too old for this kind of activity.

Nowadays, researchers more and more frequently notice differences between homosexual males and females with respect to the ageing process and how it is perceived. Their research reveals that many gays approach the ageing processes negatively, with a tendency towards depression and low spirits. Homosexual females are more optimistic and active. Physical appearance and youthfulness play a smaller role in the lesbian environment than it does in the gay environment. Although some elderly women feel socially “invisible”, suffering the consequences of not only homophobia and ageism, but also sexism, other research shows that many of them enjoy respect among young lesbians, performing the role of “community patrons” or “grandmas”. Robert Schope (2005) asked his homosexual respondents (74 men and 109 women) at what age a homosexual person becomes old. The average age selected by gay men is 38,8 years, whereas among lesbians it is 48,4. The younger the respondent, the earlier he or she placed the age border (gays under 40 indicated 37, whereas older gays selected 44). Interviewees were also asked about the LGBT community’s attitude towards ageing, in their opinion. The most pejorative descriptor – “terrible” – was chosen by as few as 3,8% of lesbians and as many as 45,9% of gay men.

Susan Slater (1995) devotes part of her work about the cycles of lesbians’ family life to the ageing of non-heterosexual women. She took note of the economical aspect of their situation. She concluded that retired lesbians may experience more severe consequences of sexist discrimination on the job market than heterosexual females. Women’s statistically lower salaries lead to lower pensions. While retired heterosexual women may potentially have access to their husbands’ higher pension, or welfare payments in the case of widowhood, single-sex relationships cannot rely on such possibilities. According to Slater, elderly lesbians are thus subject to economic problems to a greater degree than heterosexuals and gay men. The author also wrote about the difficult situation of women whose female partners have died. Widows who lose their husbands can enter a socially legitimate role and live through mourning in accordance with its standards. In the case of lesbians it is not so obvious. If their relation wasn’t characterized by utter public openness (which is still rare), the person whose partner is deceased may be deprived of the public components of mourning, such as her role in funeral rites, condolences and obituaries, as the deceased’s family of origin tend to take total control of those rituals. Such situations are chiefly experienced by elderly lesbians, who may suffer from double loneliness – with no close person and no social support at all. Slater (1995: 224) claims, that “lesbian widows are frequently seen simply as lone woman, as if they had never created families at all”.

Western researchers on the specifics of gay and lesbian ageing typically place the issue in the context of problems connected with social services and health care. The authors of books and articles on the subject target students, the health care industry

and gerontology specialists. They assume that knowledge of the experiences and issues of the elderly who belong to sexual minorities can help them in working with patients or clients. In this discourse, more frequently than in case of heterosexuals, loneliness is considered as an essential element of issues affecting elderly gays and lesbians, since they less often have spouses, partners, children and grandchildren. Research on the health of elderly lesbians, gays and bisexuals indicate that this part of population is characterised by a higher level of certain severe psychical and physical chronic illnesses than the heterosexual population (Wallace et al. 2011). It may be connected with higher stress levels as a consequence of minority status.

## **2. A generational perspective on the Polish LGBT community**

In Poland, an officially functioning LGBT community only came into being after the 1989 constitutional changes. Before that, the processes of creating an own subculture concerned mostly males from big cities who created informal social circles. In the 1980s those processes were accompanied by an increased interest in homosexuals on the part of government institutions. The 1985 “Hiacynt” police campaign was illustrative of the state’s attitude towards homosexuals back then. It included detaining gays, interrogating them and filling in forms called “homosexual’s cards”. It was followed by threats to forcibly reveal the detained person’s homosexuality at work, or in front of family or friends. The experiences of today’s older gays are therefore much different from those of homosexuals growing up in the new constitutional reality. Present-day young people have significantly greater chances of functioning openly in a heterosexual environment as well as creating their own milieu, where people of the same orientation can gather. Among LGBT activists, participants in movements and users of the community’s infrastructure, elderly people are invisible. On LGBT websites and blogs, posts signaling the existence of elderly gays as leaders within the community can be sometimes seen. Janusz Boguszewicz (2006) writes about it in the following words: “Matters of age and ageing are a taboo subject particularly in the community. It is a peculiar form of internal hypocrisy and, logically speaking, it seems funny that gay communities demand respect and tolerance as generally understood for themselves while they humiliate, depreciate and exclude older gays. Older, which means old! (...) Gays are, as a rule, maladjusted to the ageing processes. Gays between 35 and 45 are usually practically ruled out of social life, or they withdraw themselves”.

The author also writes about the negative stereotype of elderly gays in homosexual community – they are perceived as an unaesthetic, lustful and impudent individuals. Another quote illustrating gays’ problems with the passage of time comes from a blog whose author writes about the relatively low border of subjective ageing: “The magic number of 30 fixes an important border for gays. Reaching that age signifies

being a gay pensioner for many gays. If one hadn't found one's second half yet, one would have a problem with that. (...) From now on wrinkles will start to appear and, what's worse, hair will start to fall out. One's thirtieth birthday spells utter distress for many gays".

The marginalisation of elderly people is intensified by the contemporary process of gay marketing. Its central image is shifting from political to lifestyle categories of identity. A model gay is young, middle-class and living in a big city, and is an ideal consumer of goods and entertainment. This stereotype is popularized by Polish TV programmes, where there are obviously no elderly homosexuals and the only acceptable figure is a young gay – a photographer, a fashion designer or the owner of an advertising agency.

### 3. The ageing of gays in literature – the case of Michał Witkowski's *Love-town*

The issue of ageing is not often touched upon in present-day literature, where non-heteronormative ageing extremely rarely appears. An illustration of a literary exploration of this subject in Polish literature is found in Michał Witkowski's novel *Love-town* (2010). Many reviews and interpretations of the book stressed that author's descriptions of the gay community are a reflection of real-life situations and maybe even characters. In the novel there is a visibly drawn difference between two worlds – the People's Republic of Poland, in which homosexuals have created an "underground", unofficial networks of relations, ties and elements of subcultural models, and the world after the constitutional transformation with an official gay infrastructure of organizations, clubs, bars, etc.

Two of the main characters are Patricia and Lucretia, who *...are already old men; whatever lives they once enjoyed are long over and done with*. Symptomatically, they are described as aged, but they about 50 years old. The presentation of their appearance is unequivocally pejorative; their bodies are unaesthetic, ugly and even disgusting. Ageing is here linked with attributes such as obesity (fat abdomens), ugly, pale skin with varicose veins and stains, bald patches, dandruff, ringworm on nails, bushy, untidy eyebrows and droopy chins. It is illustrated by the following quotes:

*Patricia: a heavy-set, run-down man with a huge baldpatch and animated, bushy eyebrows. Lucretia: wrong side of fifty, smooth-shaven, cynical, just as fat. Black fingernails eaten away by ringworm, little jokes, blasé airs*

*Patricia's hands are skinny and covered with liver spots. She has long fingernails and wears a metal bracelet with the word LOVE etched on it in English, like the ones they sell on souvenir stalls at the seaside.*

*She stands up and smoothes the grey residue of her hair. She turns the record over. She tugs her cheap jumper with its naff pattern down over her protruding belly. She's ugly. Even though she's practically bald, she has dandruff.*

The characters' clothes complement their appearance. Their garments are first of all unfashionable, from the times of their youth. Descriptions contain such items as old, patterned jumpers, brown creased trousers, the cheapest black briefs, black, darned socks, berets and leather caps. Patricia's and Lucretia's apparel is the result of, among other things, their low economic status, which is based on annuity benefits. What is also connected with that is the poor and cheap look of their flat where nothing has changed for decades.

*Grinding poverty. Their laundry dries on a line hung over the stove. Men's underwear, all of it black, and the cheapest brand; darned socks, black too.*

The men are described as museum exhibits – dusty and neglected. Their efforts to keep some pretenses of attractive appearance are shown as absurd and pathetic.

*But the moment one takes a seat, the other suddenly realises she needs to spray her armpits with deodorant, or brush her hair in front of the cracked mirror (...). They preen and primp themselves the whole time.*

The descriptions of the protagonists are clearly based on the stereotypical image of elderly women. It is illustrated by attributes such as textile, flowered shopping bags or the species of flowers grown on the windowsill, namely geraniums and aloes. Ageing is also connected with infantilism. The feminine men's self-presentation, which descends from gay subcultural models – their feminine names, poses and gestures – is presented as doting and pretentious.

*Oh stop, darling! Patricia gets "dramatic" and pours tea into a chipped cup; old and grimy though it may be, it still comes on a saucer and with a serviette (...)*

*Being "dramatic", "camping it up" and, being "swish" mean acting like a woman, whatever they understand by that. Apparently it means flapping their hand and squealing, saying like "Oh, stop!" and "Christ, Christina!"(...)*

Patricia and Lucretia are presented as a kind of "cultural relic"; fossils from the past. Their world consists of cruising (walking around conventional places for establishing sexual relations – parks, the vicinity of railway stations and public toilets), sex with Soviet soldiers deployed in barracks, sitting in old cafés, going to health resorts, etc. For them, ageing holds no benefits, but only losses. They have no chances of finding attractive sexual partners; loneliness is part of their everyday life. Many of their friends and acquaintances from the old days are dead as a result of, inter alia, the AIDS epidemic and once relatively frequent in cases of murders and robberies in the gay

community. They live in a world of imagination and fantasies, and the basic element of their narration is reminiscing the past and youth as a “paradise lost”. They associate the past only with positive things. They surround themselves with relics from their youth which evoke emotions. These are objects like photographs, CDs or – what is described as one of the biggest treasures – so-called “military relics”, i.e. belts, knives and foot wraps that carry a smell reminding them of their sexual conquests in barracks. The characters’ ageing is connected with their conviction that they do not belong in the new times; that they do not have adequate virtues nor skills essential for functioning in the modern society. They do not use the Internet and do not function in the life of the present-day gay community. They feel distance towards contemporary “modern” gays, do not share a common language with them, and find their system of values, attitudes, models of behaviour and adaptive strategies unfamiliar. They are also convinced that young gays not only do not accept them but also accuse them of damaging the image of gays in society. They are experiencing double marginalization – from the dominant community’s nonacceptance of homosexuality and from the minority community for not conforming to the acceptable image of a gay as a young and attractive habitu  of fashionable caf s, an emancipation activist who does not contest dominant values such as faithfulness and linking sex with emotions.

The tragedy of Lucretia’s and Patricia’s situation lies in the fact that their ageing and its consequences overlapped with sociocultural changes which, by creating new values and community standards, pushed them down to the dregs of the gay community. In their case age is associated with unaesthetic carnality, atrophy of sexuality, isolation, exclusion and poverty.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The situation of non-heterosexual elderly people in Poland is different from that in the West. In the United States and the countries of Western Europe, older people belong to a generation which fought for the rights of sexual minorities (the so-called “Stonewall Generation”). The number of countries where gays and lesbians are allowed to contract civil unions, marriages and even adopt children is systematically increasing. It is thus much less reasonable to describe elderly homosexual men and women as particularly exposed to loneliness and discrimination in the West than in Poland. Moreover, members of these communities have various associations and organizations at their disposal, such as SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment) or Old Lesbians Organizing For Change. In Poland, LGBT organizations are not numerous and do not include among their goals any actions directed towards senior citizens. Elderly gays and lesbians are an unusual generation in our country. They have grown up in times when homosexuality was widely perceived as pathological, evil or sinful. In new social conditions they are not present

in organizations or associations, they have not established their own environmental infrastructure, which could cater to their needs, and thus they remain an “invisible community”. Elderly lesbians all seem to be symbolically annihilated, whereas older gay men may be perceived, like the protagonists of *Lovetown*, as representing almost exclusively pejorative traits.

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## **Old age and death. The perception of old age in the context of death in the Polish countryside at the turn of 20th century and the interwar period (1918–1939)**

### **Streszczenie**

W niniejszym artykule stawiam sobie za cel przeanalizowanie odbioru, postrzegania osób starszych w obliczu śmierci (jak się zachowywali wobec nieuniknionego) na wsi polskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku i w okresie międzywojennym (1918–1939). Opieram się na materiale etnograficznym, pamiętnikarstwie chłopskim, koresponduję z literaturą przedmiotu (głównie etnologiczną). Ukazano, że ludzie starsi przygotowywali się na śmierć a wspólnota wiejska uznawała, iż jako osoby bliskie zaświatom, tamtemu światu mogą pośredniczyć między sacrum a profanum, szczególnie podczas konania i w rytuale pogrzebowym. W społeczności wiejskiej dominował wariant śmierci oswojonej (w ujęciu Philippe Ariesa), był on żywotny nie tylko na przełomie XIX i XX wieku, ale także w dwudziestolecium międzywojennym. W kulturze tradycyjnej śmierć była zjawiskiem wszechobecnym spotykanym we wspólnocie wiejskiej, w rytmie pracy i odbiorze natury. Śmierć pozostawała przede wszystkim wydarzeniem wspólnotowym, wiązała się z konserwatywną kulturą ludową. Aczkolwiek już w dwudziestolecium międzywojennym rejestrowano stopniowy zanik tradycji, zatracanie niektórych ludowych sensów, uproszczanie ceremoniałów. Były to jednak zmiany postępujące bardzo wolno.

### **Hasła kluczowe:**

historia starości, ludowa tanatologia, kultura ludowa

### **Abstract**

The goal of the article is to analyze the attitude and perception of the old facing death (the way the old behaved towards the inevitable) in the Polish countryside at the turn of 20th century and in the interwar period (1918–1939). The analysis is based on ethnographic material and diaries of peasants, and corresponds to (mainly ethnological) literature on the subject. It is shown that the elderly were preparing themselves for death, and that the rural community believed that because of old people's proximity to death, they could mediate between the sacred and the profane, especially while dying and during the burial rite. In the rural community the idea of "tamed death" (as used by Phillippe Aries) was dominant. The idea was present not only at the turn of 20th century but also during the interwar period. In traditional culture, death was an omnipresent phenomenon encountered in rural communities, work rhythm and perception of nature. Death was, first and foremost, a communal event within conservative folk culture. However, during the interwar period a gradual decline could already be observed, with the disappearance of folk concepts and simplification of ceremonies. These changes happened very slowly, however.

### **Key words:**

the history of old age, folk thanatology, folk culture

The phenomenon of death, as we all know, is the unfathomable mystery of human existence. To this day, it provokes thought and questions. However, the questions are now generally articulated in tears, fear and uncertainty, or are marked with a pessimistic tone. Even the development of modern medicine and longer life expectancy do not suppress people's fear of the end. What is more, some argue that this fear is even intensified. Vladimir Jankélévitch states it clearly: "It turns out that diseases which were believed to be incurable disappear like snow exposed to the sun. The only thing that will always remain incurable is death, the disease of diseases. Disease may be treated by definition. Death is the exception; the disease of those who feel perfectly well" (Jankélévitch 2005: 80). People die at different ages, so death concerns both young and old, but, as Pascal would say, a person always dies alone, for no one else can pass this threshold with them. The following statement from the book of Sirach in the Bible is still relevant: "All flesh grows old like a garment; the ancient decree is, «You will certainly die!»" (Sirach 14, 17). Old age is close to death (due to the fact that it is not followed by any other period of human life). On the other hand, can anything be close to this phenomenon? The knowledge of discursive thought surrenders here, or risks condemning itself to absurdity (Jankélévitch 2005: 85).

In the past, in traditional rural communities, the phenomenon of death was experienced by the entire community. Death in those days happened more often than today, and hence old people could get accustomed to it – many children died, epidemics killed entire families, and deaths were more frequent in the context of the multi-generation family. Moreover, in rural communities at the turn of 20th century, the symbolism of death appeared in ceremonies such as birth and marriage, accompanied farmers during agrarian rites, and was associated with one of the seasons of the year, namely winter (Simonides 2004: 285). Spring and autumn solstices, sunrise, midnight, New Year's Eve – all these important moments were treated as peculiar clashes of night and day; death and life (Pawluczuk 1978: 58). Death and life informed several customs. Rituals, initiations and all sanctioned changes of social status reflected, and existed in relation to, the difference between the sacred and the profane (the other world and this world) (Tokarska et al. 1982: 79–84). It was believed that death, as radically different from life, frees people from the destructive influence of time and the limitations of the human condition, by transporting them to the land free of disease, transition, and death itself (Kowalski 2007: 551). Death was omnipresent, observed both directly in the rhythm and transformations of nature – in the seasons and changing vegetation – and in the contemporary social order: old people were mediators of important values and examples to follow, since they had spent their entire lives preparing to die and thus knew how to face the end of life in dignity; it was expected of them and they did not want to disappoint the other members of the community. Death was also visible through the influence of the Catholic faith (especially in the doc-

trine of the afterlife, but also in its symbolism; especially the symbolism of the cross) (Jackowski 1986: 4).

During the time of the Second Polish Republic the attitude of peasants towards death did not change significantly. It was a “tamed” death (as understood by Philippe Ariès), which people constantly faced. Bishop Józef Zawitkowski wrote about his homeland in Mazovia, “People in the countryside / were accustomed to death, / because the mortality rate was high. / Children died, young people died, / middle-aged and older people died. / Diseases were not diagnosed, / and medical assistance was rare. / People died from shortness of breath, / from consumption, from colic or paralysis. / Older people were expecting death” (*A letter from Bishop...*, (2011)). It is not surprising that in the face of harsh living conditions, the elderly saw salvation in death after a long and tiring life. Old people facing bad living conditions used to say: “Please God, take me to you” (*A letter from Bishop...*, (2011)).

Death was discussed on a daily basis. People believed in the constant presence of the souls of the dead among the living (especially during crucial holidays) (Kowalska-Lewicka 1995: 43). People, especially old people, believed that they had received their life from God, and that the Creator of life himself would judge their lives. However, that thought did not fill them with fear and it did not result in rebellion (Simonides 1988: 125–126). All people were aware of their own death, of which they were reminded since their youth by means of family rituals such as the custom of receiving a piece of white cloth several meters long from one’s godmother at baptism. The cloth was used for diapers, but also served during one’s wedding ceremony and burial.

Religion gave hope in the face of death and presented an eschatological vision, which was particularly strong in religiosity after of the Council of Trent, and was dominant in the Polish countryside at the turn of 20th century. People were constantly interested in their fate after death.

Old people played an important role in people’s thanatology. In proverbs there was certain determinism which associated death with the natural culmination of an old person’s life. It was said: “Old age brings the grave closer” (Julian Krzyżanowski, *Nowa Księga Przysłów*, v. 1–4, PIW, Warszawa 1969–1978, OLD AGE 28) and “death looks into an old person’s eyes.” (Oskar Kolberg, *Przysłowia*, Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1977, OLD 3) Or more brutally: “when you are met by skinny Death with its scythe, it says: go back where you, old geezer, came from.” (O. Kolberg, *Przysłowia...*, DEATH 5.) In reports from Zaborowo by Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska in the late 1930s, she speaks of a 90-year-old man, whose neighbours and relatives reminded him about the inevitability of death in everyday situations. They used to say: “Oh, grandpa, grandpa, how old you are! Soon you will face the divine court” or “So many years you have lived, grandpa! It’s your time, even though you are still vigorous” (Zawistowicz-Adamska 1948: 71).

Dying people were able to remain calm until the last moments of their lives. They did not rebel and saw death as a withdrawal from worldly troubles, passing to the land of the dead while hoping for God's grace. More often than not, they showed no fear of the inevitable. In their daily prayers, older people also prayed for a happy death for their loved relatives and friends, before mentioning their own death in the near future. Villagers were not afraid of death (except for sudden death). Jan Słomka wrote: "People were dying without fear and being extraordinarily calm. A peasant, for example, when he felt close to death, called for his wife, children, servants, relatives and neighbours to tell them that he would die soon. He said goodbye to them, apologized for his wrongdoings and asked his neighbours and close friends to help his wife transport his dead body to the cemetery. In other words, he was preparing to pass to the next world as calmly as if he were soon to return home" (Słomka 2008: 116). Dying "well" became a part of people's behavior: they thanked the gathered for coming, apologized, blessed, gave last orders as far as their property was considered and even planned their own funerals (Kowalska-Lewicka 1995: 45). Besides, dying people collected funds in advance for their last moments (especially for the wake and the funeral banquet). Familiarity with death was so commonplace that coffins were made for seriously ill people. When old people had not yet prepared their last will, younger people would remind them to do so (Szczypka 1984: 275). Dying old people gathered all their strength to prepare their last will, out of an eschatological conviction, like the one recorded in Galicia, that people "who died without settling matters with their children would not have any peace in the grave" (Kowalski K. 1928: 29). A dying person was saying goodbye to this world. As related from the village of Studzianki near Lublin at the beginning of the 20th century, a dying old person would effectively say to loved ones gathered around: "Stay healthy! Time for me to go to the holy land; time to rest. One has worked hard, so one demands some rest from God. Oh, demands, demands. Good God!" The old person cries, reaching out with pleading hands. A genuine desire to rest after a life of hard work is, indeed, present in this request" (Staniszewska 1902: 604).

After death, the deceased was dressed in a white shirt and laid on a wooden board in the center of the house, surrounded by rows of burning candles. Then, the deceased was visited by all the villagers who wanted to say goodbye. Relatives came from distant areas. It is noteworthy that, in some regions of Poland, beggars called „proszalni dziedowię” were the ones who said prayers and sang mournful songs until the body was taken outside the house. Prayers usually lasted for three days, and the nights were so-called "empty nights".

Old people stayed near the dying person, led the prayers during the empty nights, washed the dead body and cleaned the house. The moments connected with death and the rituals celebrated at the funeral and during the mourning period were religious and magical. They were led by a so-called „odpraszacz”, who was almost irreplaceable dur-

ing the funeral ceremony. Jan Marcinek, a peasant and a documenter of folk culture from Bierkowice in the Myślenice district, wrote just after World War II (although his words apply equally well to the turn of 20th century) about the importance of the *odpraszcacz*: “The *odpraszcacz* was an important figure in the village of the past. During funerals people could not manage without him, unless the deceased left a considerable fortune and his family could afford to bring a priest to the house. But even in this case an *odpraszcacz* was needed, as after the ceremonial prayers in the house, the priest would leave, especially when the village was far away from the church. So there had to be someone who would lead the mourning procession and sing during the transportation of the deceased to the church” (Marcinek 1947: 189). The *odpraszcacz* was usually an old man, often “one of the senior peasants” who was believed to be approaching his own death and hence close to the afterworld (and who could, due to his age, mediate between the world of the living and the world of death). The *odpraszcacz* was usually an old, exceptionally pious and respected person. Stanisław Pigoń wrote about the function of the *odpraszcacz* during a funeral ceremony: “There used to be a tradition that before the coffin was taken to the cemetery, the relatives, friends and neighbours of the deceased would gather in the house, where, after a short funeral banquet with beer, they took part in the preliminary burial rite. One of the oldest and most pious farmers would lead the rite. He would recite penitential psalms, chant funeral songs, deliver a speech on the virtues and merits of the deceased, and finally apologise on behalf of the deceased to all the people gathered for all the evil that the deceased had ever committed. This «evil» was divided into individual apologies:

– Forgive me if I was ... etc.

A certain kind of dialogue was created because the crowd would answer in a chorus:

– We forgive you!

It was called «*wypraszenie*» (imploring) on behalf of the dead person.

Well, for a long time my grandfather was such a «*wyprasznik*» (implorer) in his village. After performing this ceremony, he would lead the coffin to the cemetery” (Pigoń 1946: 77). Sometimes the oldest relative of the dead person also participated in the farewell. He would say goodbye to the dead person on behalf of the family (Kwaśniewicz 1981: 112). On the way to the cemetery the crowd sang funeral songs, some of which were a particular farewell to the dead.

Old people helped place the body in the grave, and sometimes an old man (one of the local beggars) would throw a clod of earth on the coffin. The funeral banquet constituted a return to the profane; to ordinary life. That breakthrough happened immediately after the end of the funeral banquet. (Brenz 1987: 227, Kowalska-Lewicka 1995: 47). Just like with wedding ceremonies, an old village beggar had to be invited to each funeral, as a representative of the other world. He also had to be invited to the funeral banquet.

The above-mentioned relationship between old age and death, and the funeral ceremonies as described above, mainly refer to the turn of 20th century, but the traditional model of folk thanatology was also visible in the interwar period (1918–1939). Death was still identified as a community event the whole village had to face. People supported one another following the death of someone from the rural community. Longina Gabryszak of Vilnius recalls: “During funerals, when someone among us had died, nothing else mattered ... if it happened during harvest time, nobody went to the fields. People visited day and night, so the corpse would not be alone in the house. [...] Well, the whole village came in turns. When a husband and children visited to the dead, his wife would stay at home, and when the wife came to visit, they would leave. Then they would be at home to take care of the house. People would sit and sing all these songs to the deceased, who was there for three days until the burial” (Gabryszak 2010). All the villagers focused their attention on mourning and on the funeral ceremony. Neighbours felt obliged to be at the funeral (Szewieliński 2008)<sup>1</sup> In the interwar period, funeral ceremonies changed somewhat. In Dobrinland, for instance, the duration of empty nights shortened, while in other regions people ceased to sing the songs traditionally associated with funerals. All rites concerning the dead were performed mechanically. People knew less and less about folk thanatology.

To recapitulate, old people in rural communities were prepared to die, and many speculated about it and contemplated its inevitable approach while praying. The other members of the community were convinced that the elderly, in being close to the afterworld (insofar as they were expected to die soon), would direct death to the other world, so that it no longer marauded among the living. Ideas concerning old age in the face of death were extremely conservative and constant. The folk idea of death has not changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Vaclav Szewieliński recalls: “The priest had to be brought to the dead person’s house and accompanied the corpse to the cemetery. When it was far, like in our case 5 kilometers, the priest and all of us would ride carts or sledges. But when the funerals took place not only that village but also all the friends ... to tell you the truth not many people stayed at home because all of them were saying goodbye to their neighbour.[...]” b. 1920 (2008).

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**Images of old age  
in contemporary culture**



## **Portrayal of senior citizens in Polish television drama series<sup>1</sup>**

### **Streszczenie**

Tekst jest analizą wizerunków seniorów w najpopularniejszych polskich serialach obyczajowych. Pokazuje, iż wizerunki te są wyidealizowane, realistyczne, a także takie, które są formą promocji nowych, bardziej aktywnych postaw w wieku senioralnym. Z badań z odbiorcami wynika jednak, że najlepiej przyjmowane są wizerunki tradycyjne prezentujące seniorów jako statecznych dziadków, a szczególną sympatią widzów cieszy się obraz troskliwej, ciepłej babci, strażniczki domowego ogniska.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

senior, serial telewizyjny, wizerunki, odbiór widzów

### **Abstract**

This text analyses the portrayal of senior citizens in the most popular Polish drama television serials. It shows representations that are idealized or realistic, but also some that promote new, more active attitudes in old age. Research with viewers shows, however, that the best received images are traditional ones, which portray senior citizens as stable old folks; viewers are especially fond of the image of the caring, warm grandmother, guardian of hearth and home.

### **Key words:**

senior citizen, television serial, portrayal, viewer reception

Contemporary research regarding television is increasingly becoming an area of public discourse. Television serials are treated as a result of the characteristics of the genre and the creation process – taking into account the time and place in which they are created, the creators' ideas about certain problems, cultural models functioning in the society in question and various interest groups – which can reach viewers and meet social expectations through transmission of content. Therefore, television serials are an interesting cultural source which, partly because of its polysemy, offers the possibility of presenting various attitudes, ideas, judgements and opinions. They also seem significant due to their great popularity: even bestselling books or magazines do not reach as many recipients. Additionally, thanks to modern technology, one can be a regular viewer without considerable effort, regardless of airing time, and also share one's opinions about certain stories, argue and relive the emotions connected with them. Modern media are

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often accused of creating a cult of youth and beauty. Therefore it is worth asking whether, and in what context, the image of senior citizens appears in the most popular television productions; how old age is presented and how it is received by viewers. In attempting to answer this question I will refer to many years of analysis of Polish drama serials<sup>2</sup>. For the purpose of this text I have focused on storylines involving senior citizens, i.e. retirees who are at least 65 years old. When it comes to characters in television serials, we sometimes do not have exact information regarding their age, but we can infer it based on other information, e.g. the fact that they are retired, have grown-up grandchildren, remember World War II, etc.

In the analysed serials, less than 5% of all primary and secondary characters are senior citizens, because the stories are dominated by young and middle-aged characters. In a few of the analysed shows, senior citizens do not appear at all, or as strictly episodic, tertiary characters. Characters of mature age in serials are presented in a variety of social contexts and play various roles.

## 1. Elderly people living with the family

When senior citizens appear as primary characters in serials, we usually see them as members of a multi-generational family, living with their children and grandchildren, most often in a home which belongs to them. We see such families in *Clan*, *L is for Love*, *First love* and *Colours of happiness*, The third generation actively participates in family life, engages in daily chores and responsibilities, and cares for the adult children and often also the grown-up grandchildren. The grandparents do not live in a separate household, but as part of a larger familial community. They experience their children's marital conflicts and childrearing problems, and they take part in making key decisions. They are often party to different disputes and conflicts and always stand for traditional values, namely maintaining family unity and the sanctity of marriage, and promoting the good of the children. Additionally, they help pass on and maintain religious values – especially the women. While grandfathers guard traditions of patriotism and national sovereignty, they pass on historical knowledge to their grandchildren: memories of their youth and attachment to national symbols and their homeland. The characters which receive the most exposure in serials are usually family matrons (sometimes we see families with only a widowed grandmother), usually presented in the role of ideal grandmothers.

## 2. The ideal grandmother

Grandmothers presented in serials are usually portrayed as retired or simply taking care of the home and grandchildren full-time in old age. They have more time, unlike

<sup>2</sup> I have included the following serials in this analysis: *Clan*, *For better or worse*, *Parish*, *L is for Love*, *That's life*, *On Wspólna street*, *Rose lodge*, *First love*, *Colours of happiness*, *Hotel 52*, *Lifeline*, *Gallery*, *Doctors*, *Recipe for life*, *Agata's right*, *Girlfriends*, *It's all before us*.

the mothers, but also more patience and can focus on the grandchildren who are sometimes somewhat neglected by their busy, working mother. Therefore the grandmother gives the little grandchildren tender care and a feeling of security and familial warmth. Apart from that and regardless of the grandchildren's age, the grandmother is also the guardian of various traditions. She personifies the comfort of the family nest, where there is always a warm meal waiting, the smell of homemade cake, preserves and the unforgettable flavours of childhood; she will also tell the best bedtime story, reminisce about her youth and provide an introduction to the world of old beliefs and holiday traditions. The grandmother is also associated with unconditional love and acceptance of the grandchildren. Unlike the parents, the grandmother has more tolerance for the grandchildren's various shortcomings and minor sins; she will support, understand and cheer them up, and since she does not have as big a sense of responsibility for their upbringing, she is not as demanding, strict or consistent. If needed, in situations of conflict between maturing children and parents, it is often the grandmother who is the negotiator and presents the arguments of both sides. Her life experience lets her look upon current problems with perspective. Therefore, the grandmother satisfies many practical, everyday needs – she will walk the grandchildren to preschool or school, will watch over them when the parents are busy, care for them in sickness, make delicious preserves for the winter, show them how to knit or crochet, bake cakes, prepare their favourite deserts, etc. The grandmother also satisfies many emotional needs – she is supportive, gives unconditional love, embraces, caresses and can help out financially by e.g. adding some money to savings for a bike, skates or other desired object.

It turns out that despite their traditionalism, grandfathers and especially grandmothers can be quite tolerant and full of understanding towards their grandchildren; even more so than towards their own children. Thus we often see grandparents defending their grandchildren in conflicts with the parents, and accuse their children of spending too little time with, and not paying enough attention to, the grandchildren (*Colours of happiness, Clan, L is for love, That's life, Parish, Recipe for life*). Although we sometimes hear the senior citizens sigh and say that they don't understand the younger generation very well or cannot keep up, we often see that they are supportive of their grandchildren; talking to them and helping in difficult situations.

In the analysed serials we also see grandmothers as their grandchildren's sole guardians. When the parents are working abroad and sending money, the responsibility for daily care falls on the growing children's grandmother (*Parish, Colours of happiness, For better or worse*). Sometimes grandmothers take over care for their grandchildren when the parents have died (*Parish, Colours of happiness, First love*). Despite the strong bond with their grandmother, the grandchildren sometimes cause trouble, neglect their studies or come into conflict with the law, which results in probation or even jail. Sometimes these problems are connected with the family's financial situation. Grandmothers

who raise grandchildren by themselves usually have some financial difficulties. Generally, the material situation of elderly characters leaves something to be desired. We often hear about low retirement benefits and a frugal lifestyle, with a lack of funds for medicine and any kind of durable goods, especially if the current ones break or wear down. We see senior citizens who take out loans and cannot repay them or have trouble covering the cost of a roof repair, payments for dental prosthetics or costly medical care (*Clan, Parish, That's life*) without help from their family.

Senior citizens who live with their children's family are portrayed as people surrounded by love, care and respect from their relatives. Senior citizens help with their children's and grandchildren's daily tasks and support them, but also receive support themselves. Their children not only assist them financially, but also care for their health, help with the more difficult chores and nurse them when they are sick. We can observe examples of such ideal relationships in serials such as *Clan, L is for love, Colours of happiness* and *First love*. Sometimes, the serials in question show a generational conflict: a lack of acceptance for the attitudes or opinions of the grandchildren, or in turn a conviction on the part of the grandchildren that the life choices, views or demands of the grandparents are antiquated or strange (*Parish, Clan, L is for love*). Usually, however, a strong emotional bond outlives the temporary misunderstandings. After all, the serials often let us observe an exchange of life experiences between grandparents and grandchildren. Grandparents, being the guardians of tradition, share their rich experience with their grandchildren, while the younger generation helps introduce the senior citizens to modern technology or new phenomena. So we see teenagers or students showing senior citizens how to handle home appliances and computers, how to conduct electronic bank transfers, and how to use e-mail, Skype or mobile phones (*Clan, Parish, That's life, L is for love*).

### **3. Senior citizens living alone**

Some of the elderly characters in serials are people who have no children or close relatives and live independently with their spouses or alone, usually after the death of their life partners. These characters are very rarely shown as lonely or unhappy people; usually they have other relatives or a group of friends, on whom they can count in need and with whom they spend their holidays or free time. In the serials analysed there are numerous instances of such relations. A few times we observe a developing friendship between older characters living on their own and incidental young acquaintances, who become a kind of surrogate family (*L is for love, Parish, For better or worse, Colours of happiness*).

### **4. Elderly people as a burden on the family**

Apart from the vision of harmonious relations between senior citizens and their families and surroundings, the analysed serials also show relationships that are difficult

or more conflicted. Aged characters are often treated as a troublesome burden, especially if they require constant care. Adult children or grandchildren are often rude to the grandparents or treat them and their needs with disregard, making decisions about their life without involving them. In the serials analysed we see a family that deprives a grandfather of his pension, siblings disputing over who should take care of their sick or disabled parent, and grandchildren moving their grandfather or grandmother to the hospital during the holidays or trying to certify them as incapacitated in order to take over their assets (*Parish, Clan, For better or worse, Agata's rights*). Poor treatment of the elderly is presented as unrelated to environment or social status. The depiction of older persons in serials is a clear voice in support of their ageing with dignity, of which no one, including the family, should deprive them.

## 5. Senior citizens in retirement homes

A similar message accompanies the portrayal of residents of retirement and nursing homes, who are background characters in several of the analysed serials. A recurring element in the depiction of nursing homes is a critical attitude toward the management of these establishments. Several times we see the administration poorly managing funds received for the upkeep of the home, physically or mentally abusing the residents, giving the senior citizens sedatives not prescribed by a doctor, or taking possession of their valuables (*Parish, Rose lodge*). What is more, the serials show local governments usually treating retirement homes as a necessary evil, limiting their funds, neglecting repairs or deciding to move the establishment to a different, less suitable space without hesitation (*Parish, Gallery*). There is a clear suggestion that the elderly are not particularly important to the people in charge. The atmosphere in these homes, the feeling of daily, mundane repetition and the limitation of freedom make the residents want to change their situation, at least temporarily; to spend a few days or even hours in a different, more exciting way. These desires are fulfilled by senior citizens in serials who run away from their retirement or nursing home and organize their time independently, which gives them at least a bit of pleasure, entertainment and distraction from the everyday (*Rose lodge, For better or worse, Hotel 52*). In these depictions, old age in a home is shown as the rather sad and lonely autumn of life, especially for those whose relatives do not care about them at all and rarely or never visit them; even holidays being no exception (*Parish, Rose lodge, Gallery*).

## 6. The autumn of life – reflection and creation

The serialised image of life in old age is varied. In many ways, this portrayal is a reflection of reality. The senior citizens shown usually live modestly and have limited financial resources: only sharing a household with their grown-up children and receiving

permanent help from them, or working after retirement helps their material standing. Very often older people are shown wanting to be needed; they help and provide care. This applies especially to women. The serials confirm the image of an ideal grandmother. The audience is a receptive target since fewer and fewer families live together with their grandparents, and a reference to this slightly idealized depiction of the grandmother can be seen as a return to the idyllic land of childhood, where grandma personifies the feelings of that time: warmth, stability and support. The other, no less significant reason for the popularity of this idealized image is that the emotional bond in Polish families is still quite strong, as is the idea that one should support one's grown-up children – if in no other way, then at least by helping raise their children. In short, the care of a grandmother is part of the experience of consecutive generations of Poles. CBOS shows this quite clearly in their surveys regarding what Poles are grateful for when it comes to grandmothers and grandfathers. The research has been conducted cyclically, in 2000, 2007 and 2012. According to the results, most Polish people – 59% in 2000 (Wciórka 2001), 56% in 2007 (Szczepańska 2008) and 72% in 2012 (Kowalczyk 2012) – declared that they owe a lot to their grandmother or grandfather. In the most recent survey, respondents usually stated that they are thankful for their care (65%) and thanks to their grandmothers/-fathers they felt loved (64%). Grandfathers and grandmothers are also a source of knowledge about the history of the family (57% of all surveyed). Most respondents also received some moral ground rules from them (57%) and religious faith (54%). Almost half of all respondents (48%) feel that grandparents taught them certain character traits such as being hard-working, responsible and self-disciplined.

The number of people who feel grateful to their grandparents is all the more significant when we consider that 8% of those surveyed said that they do not remember or never knew their grandmothers or grandfathers. No less interesting is the fact that usually the youngest generation feels that they owe a lot to their grandparents. In the 18–24 age group this amounts to 88%; for ages 25–34 it is 82% (Kowalczyk 2012). One could try to explain the lower percentage in the older group as the result of fading or weaker memory. However, I think that what we see here is a certain tendency which is also confirmed by research conducted with young people in smaller (not nationwide) samples. In the nineties, Hanna Świda-Ziemba (2000) studied Warsaw high school students and noticed their very strong bonds with grandparents (mostly grandmothers, because they were more likely still to be alive). The students made it clear in interviews that they receive emotional support and unconditional love from their grandparents, who are also, as people who have and uphold clearly defined values, stronger role models than their parents. Even if they are perceived as somewhat archaic and hold views contrary to that of their grandchildren, they still command respect through their faithfulness to each other.

Serials fairly often present emotional ties and marriages formed in the late years of life. Usually, these are new relationships, mostly formed by widowed people (*Clan, L is*

for love, *That's life*, *Rose lodge*, *Recipe for life*, *Agata's right*), but there are also stories of characters who have spent their lives alone and find someone in old age, become engaged emotionally and decide to share a future (*Clan*, *First love*, *For better or worse*). All such relations are shown favourably; rarely do we see an adverse attitude in these couples' surroundings. It is more likely that the senior citizens themselves have doubts about whether it is right to start a new life at their age, while the family and friends support their decision. The only negative reactions appear among adult children who are afraid that the parent's new marriage in old age will threaten their inheritance of assets, e.g. a flat (*Rose lodge*, *Clan*, *For better or worse*). The senior citizens' relationships and their emotional relations, whether lasting for many years or recently formed, are portrayed similarly to the relationships of the younger people. We see strong emotions, jealousy, displays of affection, intimacy, and in the case of recently formed bonds, the typical elements of new partnerships – namely getting to know each other's habits and learning mutual compromise.

In the serials analysed it is much rarer to see an image of active old age, full of passion and interests. The majority of senior citizens in serials travel seldom or never and do not display much activity, be it physical, cultural or social. Sometimes we see an episodic character, who despite their age strives to remain active. An exception among these serials is *Recipe for life*, where alongside the main characters aged 30–40 there is also a group of one of the characters' mother's friends. She is retired and has an adult granddaughter and a circle of friends of her own age with whom she spends time playing bridge, walking, meeting over wine, going to the cinema and concerts, or dancing. They all decide to take a dance class and one of the couples later takes part in a dance contest. The men indulge their historical interests by taking part in historical reconstructions of battles. A man she has recently met, who becomes her partner, invites her to go parasailing. *Recipe for life* is also the only serial in which there is mention of senior citizens and sex, showing all areas of the characters' lives with fondness, showing their joy of life, as well as the balance between the role of a grandmother who supports her daughter and grandchildren, and a mature woman who has the right to her own life and happiness.

The image of an active, dynamic person clearly contrasts with Polish reality, considering various studies that show that Polish senior citizens most often base their retired life on family, church, television and maybe a summer house or garden. After retirement there is a retreat from professional, cultural and social life (Wądołowska 2010; Trafiałek 2003). However, one could treat these serials' portrayals of active senior citizens as a way of promoting alternative role models and encouraging retirees not to stay at home and limit their lives to television and grandchildren. It is a shame, then, that such models are usually incidental or the subject of a one-time plot element (probably introduced by contract), probably rendering their impact rather insignificant.

Several times, the senior citizens in serials who try to hang on to their youth are shown in a comical and to some extent patronizing manner (*Parish, Rose lodge, For better or worse*). Slight vices or various oddities to which old people are prone are also shown in a similar fashion (e.g. disregarding doctors' orders and eating sweets and fatty foods, or drinking alcohol or smoking). In these portrayals the senior citizens appear as unruly children who require guidance and control, although they are usually shown with fondness.

## 7. Reception of senior citizens in serials

I wanted to compare the presentation of senior citizens in serials with viewer reception. I tried to show how serial content is decoded by analysing two types of materials: internet forums devoted to specific serials<sup>3</sup> and casual, open interviews conducted according to the same structure<sup>4</sup>.

From the material analysed I conclude that the most widely accepted image of senior citizens is that of the cornerstone of the family; the warm, wise and good grandparent who supports their children and grandchildren with advice. Grandmothers should be resourceful, excellent cooks, caring and prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of the family. Senior citizens are accepted if they show concern and care but do not try to interfere with their children's or grandchildren's lives too much. The portrayal of senior citizens who strayed from this stereotypical image proved quite controversial. Scenes of jealousy among older characters, as well as displays of various forms of physical activity (e.g. going to the gym or pool or engaging in Nordic walking) or cultural activity (e.g. going to the cinema or using the internet) spurred discussion among viewers. Some accused the creators of an unrealistic portrayal, while others criticised them with indignation, claiming that such behaviour is inappropriate for senior citizens. Some viewers, however, protested against the marginalization of senior citizens, which limits their activity to watching television, caring for grandchildren and religious practices.

This dispute clearly shows that opinion is divided regarding the social standing of senior citizens and their assumed rules of behaviour. Traditional convictions are still quite strong, namely that old age should be stable and focused on the family and the needs of others, at the expense of one's own needs, which become insignificant. I think that media portrayals (serials included) of other, alternative images of the elderly can play a significant role in changing views and attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> I analysed the entirety of Internet forum posts available in April 2012 on official websites for the serials analysed and on forums regarding those serials on [www.gazeta.pl](http://www.gazeta.pl), [www.filmweb.pl](http://www.filmweb.pl).

<sup>4</sup> In 2006–2012, 180 interviews were conducted with respondents who regularly viewed the selected Polish drama serials.

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### Serial titles:

*Klan* (*Clan*), *Na dobre i na złe* (*For better or worse*), *Plebania* (*Parish*), *M jak miłość* (*L is for Love*), *Samo życie* (*That's life*), *Na Wspólnej* (*On Wspólna street*), *Pensjonat pod różą* (*Rose lodge*), *Pierwsza miłość* (*First love*), *Barwy szczęścia* (*Colors of happiness*), *Hotel 52*, *Linia życia* (*Lifeline*), *Galeria* (*Gallery*), *Lekarze* (*Doctors*), *Przepis na życie* (*Recipe for life*), *Prawo Agaty* (*Agata's right*), *Przyjaciółki* (*Girlfriends*), *Wszystko przed nami* (*The future is ours, literally "it's all before us"*)



## **Can seniors be trendy? Elderly people in pop culture**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł oparty na przekazach medialnych, opisuje elementy nowoczesnego stylu życia seniorów. Jest ukłonem w kierunku gerontopedagogiki propagującej postawę pozytywnego starzenia się.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

ludzie starsi, nowoczesny styl życia seniorów, pozytywne starzenie się, starość w kulturze popularnej

### **Abstract**

This paper is based on media releases and describes aspects of the modern lifestyle of senior citizens. It promotes gerontological pedagogy in the context of positive attitudes to ageing.

### **Key words:**

elderly people, modern lifestyle of senior citizens, positive ageing, old age in popular culture

Consumption, mass media, mobility, homogeneity of customs and social rules are the factors which modify the identity of post-modern seniors. The regime of pop culture demands flexibility and adaptability. It requires updating one's patterns of thinking and behaving. On the one hand, it underlines difference and individuality, on the other, it forces one to adapt to the preferences of others.

Senior citizens tend to adopt the trends created by the media. They break the rules and follow what is attractive, ephemeral and transient. In line with the principle of cultural recycling, they update their knowledge about the everyday. They keep looking for ways to live and function in the world.

The materials that inspired this paper include press releases, web portals, and radio and TV messages that reveal tendencies among the third generation with regards to fashion, sport, recreation, education, etc. It should be emphasised that these are concerned with some of the more extraordinary men and women over 60. No doubt senior citizens who are aware of their needs, independent and self-sufficient, "(...) and equipped with the wisdom of maturity at the same time"<sup>1</sup> (Wandrasz 2005: 162) are emblematic for our times.

In popular culture, "(...) the body is the passport to all that is good in life" (Featherstone 1991: 186). In the 21st century, older people have started glorifying beauty, health, vitality, fashion, and care and beauty treatments. They are afraid of senility, which

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<sup>1</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) a równocześnie posiadający mądrość człowieka dojrzałego”.

has always been defined as lack of attractiveness, sickness, suffering, helplessness and limitations. They fight against “(...) wrinkles, sagging flesh, tendency towards middle-age spread, hair loss etc. (...) with help from the cosmetic, beauty, fitness and leisure industries” (Featherstone 1991: 178).

Female post-modern seniors regularly use anti-ageing products: moisturising, anti-wrinkle and firming lotions. The use of make-up tricks (using make-up for mature complexions) allows them to hide skin imperfections. Older women use skin illuminators, powders and colour correctors. There are also many products for men to help them hide the signs of ageing. Many hairdressers handle the problem of men’s grey hair.

Older women seek radical ways to improve their beauty much more often. Cosmetic surgery is now very popular. It is promoted chiefly by show business celebrities. For instance, two renowned Polish female celebrities, Krystyna Mazurówna (dancer and choreographer) and Maria Czubaszek (writer) underwent cosmetic medical treatments. Both took part in the TV programme “Surgery Secrets”. They had their lips, eye lids and hands improved. There was lifting and Botox involved. In the episode broadcast on 5 March 2013, Krystyna Mazurówna confessed: “I don’t want to have the face of a 20-year-old woman. I don’t want to pretend I am 20. I want to feel OK with myself (...) Why should I be ashamed (...)? Are teeth fillings so embarrassing (...)?”<sup>2</sup> (TVN Style 2013).

Impeccable clothes have an impact on one’s image. Garments protect the body and underline gender and age differences. They generate a sense of being attractive, they emphasise individuality and they reflect the degree to which the wearer follows the latest fashion trends. Post-modern seniors are fully aware of this, as they visit shopping centres more and more often. They dress casually and elegantly and wear sporty clothes. They choose modern or vintage styles. They notice brands, colours and designs. They play with fashion. Their style can frequently be shocking, astonishing or surprising. In this context, one should definitely mention 92-year-old interior designer Iris Apfel, Anna Piaggi, the late editor of the Italian *Vogue*, and Liu Xianping, a 72-year-old man from China who poses for photos in female outfits. In 2012, a social campaign under the name of *Fashion for Everyone* was organised in Warsaw. Dorota Wróbleska, the initiator, wanted to change the way old age is perceived in Poland. Selected senior citizens took part in a fashion show and in a short film. They were also portrayed in the album *Fashion People. Poland*. The project participants proved that people of their age can be extravagant, chic and nonchalant.

Similarly, the Advanced Style blog reveals the fashion sophistication of senior citizens. The blog’s founder, Ari Seth Cohen from New York, takes photos of senior citizens’ street fashion. He engages people who are 60 or even 100 years old in his sessions. According to one blogger, they are even more absorbing than younger women “(...) because

<sup>2</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Ja nie chcę mieć twarzy 20-latki. Nie chcę udawać, że mam 20 lat. Chcę być w porządku z sobą (...) Dlaczego się wstydzić (...)? Czy plombowanie zębów też jest wstydlive (...)?”.

they are now at the age when they do not need to impress anyone. They can wear whatever they like”<sup>3</sup> (Jaklewicz 2012: 16).

In this context, it is worth mentioning retired supermodels who are making a comeback (Linda Rodin, 65; Carmen Dell’Orefice, 82; China Machado, 84; Daphne Selfe, 84), as well as beauty contests for senior citizens. The latter, though more widespread in America, have also been organised in Polish welfare centres (e. g. Ostoja Welfare Centre in Gdańsk and the Welfare Centre in Kalisz). Undoubtedly, the Israeli Miss Holocaust contest is one of the most remarkable events in this category.

Senior citizens living in a popular culture environment wish to be fitter than ever. Finally, “(...) older people are no longer afraid that sport and recreation can lead to accidents and worsen their health condition instead of improving it”<sup>4</sup> (Erazmus and Trafiałek 1997: 53). Those who were professional sportspersons in their youth are now remarkably fit. Online sources mention an 80-year-old Himalaya climber from Japan (Yuichiro Miura), the extraordinary achievements of the oldest female yoga practitioners (Tao Porchon-Lynch and Bette Calman) and the acrobatics of Johanna Quaas. Average senior citizens are following in their footsteps. They regularly attend recreation and sport clubs and go to dancing classes. They do aqua aerobics, Nordic walking, yoga, aerobics and tai-chi. They walk, run, swim and cycle. Some are lovers of skating, roller-skating and skateboarding (e. g. Tom Winter, a 69-year-old professor at Nebraska University; Lloyd Kahn, a 78-year-old writer from San Francisco).

Competitions for old men, veterans and masters are organised in response. These are contests for those who engage in team sports, athletics, table tennis or body building despite their advanced age – all those who cannot live without swimming, cycling, etc. A documentary film made in 2004, *The Masters*, is a homage to all senior citizens who enjoy physical activity. It shows the determination, the spirit and vigour of the oldest swimmers in Poland: Barbara Korol (born in 1926), Władysław Trawiński (born in 1923) and Edward Niemczyk (born in 1927).

Regardless of the recreational or professional character of doing sports, such people improve their physical and mental condition, delay the processes of ageing, stay fit and forget about everyday problems. “Apart from improving health, such activities satisfy needs related to rivalry and perfectionism as well as self-fulfilment”<sup>5</sup> (Filipek-Sperska 2012: 322).

Contrary to standard expectations, pensioners give in to hedonist drives. Professional stability is the best time to live one’s dreams and carry out previously abandoned plans and passions. The older generation indulges in pleasures, hobbies and entertainment.

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<sup>3</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) bo osiągnęły wiek, kiedy już na nikim nie muszą robić wrażenia. Mogą zakładać, co tylko chcą”.

<sup>4</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) bariera strachu, wyrażająca się w obawie, że ruch może doprowadzić do wypadków i pogorszenia stanu zdrowia, a nie jego poprawy”.

<sup>5</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Oprócz aspektu zdrowotnego (...) umożliwia (...) zaspokojenie aspiracji agonistyczno-perfekcjonistycznych oraz potrzeb w zakresie samorealizacji”.

Tourism has become one of their favourite pastimes again. However, pilgrimages are now *passè*. Senior citizens prefer cafés, clubs and discos and all the places you need to know to be cool. Following their Western peers, they choose sanatoriums and heritage tourism. They want more than just rest. They appreciate new acquaintances, attractions, unforgettable impressions and cognitive values.

In the 21st century, senior citizens are discovering new areas of activity they have never known before. They are engaging in youth professions. Wirginia Szmyt (born 1939) alias DJ Wika has been playing at a Warsaw dance club. She easily operates the console, the mixer and the laptop. She lives up to the image of a queen of the night: she wears jeans and shirts with prints. She has become recognisable in the media due to her hobby. This is a quote from one of her interviews: “When I play music, I break the stereotypes about old people. I teach the joy of life, relaxation and distance (...)”<sup>6</sup> (Lisicki 2011: 18).

Attending a so-called university of the third age is another way to manage one’s free time. This trend has also come to Poland from Western countries. Pensioners enjoy learning, which is proved by the growing number of such facilities. The curriculum is indeed impressive. It includes such sections as visual arts, literature, language, computers, sports, etc. Senior citizens can thus gain or update their knowledge in various fields. They can develop or discover new interests and cultivate their skills. They also interact with other people and make lasting friendships. “Education reinforces identity and the sense of belonging. It allows one to be in touch with the way that society develops”<sup>7</sup> (Szymanek 2010: 163). At times, senior citizens have a strong thirst for knowledge. They go to various academies to quench it. Thanks to the media, the information about the oldest students is spreading (e. g. Bogumiła Manc and Jerzy Królewiecki).

In the global society, the ability to use electronic devices is much appreciated. Seniors tend to use mobile phones and computers with internet access more frequently. IT courses for older people have made a major impact in this respect. Communication with family and friends is now extended thanks to the Internet. It is no wonder that internet users aged 60+ often send e-mails and talk via Skype to their closest relatives and friends. Some of them go even further and write electronic diaries. The oldest blogger in Poland is Zdzisław Stankiewicz, holder of a PhD in history. There are also women among the senior bloggers, for instance 92-year-old Halina Biežuńska (Grandma Halna). One of her reads: “I wonder how many women of my age are interested in computers. Maybe there are female internet users older than me? (...) How has the world changed? (...) What progress? Isn’t this a brilliant opportunity for older people? (...)”<sup>8</sup> (Halna 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Puszczając muzykę, promuję przelamywanie stereotypów o starszych i starych ludziach. Uczę radości życia, rozluźnienia, dystansu (...)”.

<sup>7</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Edukacja jest czynnikiem wzmacniającym tożsamość i przynależność do społeczeństwa, umożliwia nadążanie za jego rozwojem”.

<sup>8</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) zastanawiam się, ile kobiet w moim wieku (...) interesuje się komputerem. A może są jeszcze starsze internautki ode mnie? (...) Jak zmienił się ten świat?”

The conclusions that may be drawn from the above provide an affirmative answer to the question posed in the title of his paper. A senior citizen can definitely be trendy. The examples presented prove that there is a positive attitude towards ageing. These might resemble futuristic visions, since the number of such active senior citizens is still relatively low. “The image of a good-looking, elegant old lady is far from the average Polish stereotype of an old person”<sup>9</sup> (Czerniawska 2007: 210). Peers from other, highly developed countries are much more open to social and cultural transformations. As they live in a different reality with developed and efficient social support, they are much more adaptive. They can function effectively in the contemporary world also due to their better financial standing.

In general, all people, including senior citizens, have to face the challenge of continuously updating and broadening what they know about the reality around them. Only then will they avoid being excluded from society. Growing up not so much in old age but towards old age seems to be crucial. Gerontological education carried out from the youngest years can bring measurable effects. “Acquisition of certain habits (...) in childhood or adolescence can (...) make many things easier in the later life of a senior citizen”<sup>10</sup> (Fabiś 2005: 100). People who have always respected their own body and cultivated their intellect, taking up all kinds of activities, will continue to do so after they retire.

Following the senior citizens presented by name in this paper, all the others should break free from any limitations that restrict them and “go for it”. They should fight negative stereotypes about old age. They need to take responsibility for their own fate and the quality of their life. Why limit the range of everyday possibilities and options? They ought to follow the example of those who have destroyed myths and appealed to younger generations. Why fear ridicule due to dyed hair, hidden baldness or a masked belly (Zych 2009), if one does it on the basis of one’s own convictions? One can certainly grow old with dignity and in a youthful spirit. One does not exclude the other. Therefore, let old people think “(...) about themselves, let them look in the mirror to learn the truth about themselves from the one who faces them in the looking glass (...) let them remember that the world cares not a fig about our attitude towards them. Life will not stop to wait until we grow wiser”<sup>11</sup> (Wąchała n. d.).

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(...) Jaki postęp? Czy to nie jest wspaniałe życie dla starszej osoby? (...)”.

<sup>9</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Obraz zadbanej i eleganckiej starszej pani czy pana odbiega od tzw. przeciętnego, szarego polskiego staruszka”.

<sup>10</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „Nabywanie pewnych nawyków (...) w dzieciństwie, czy w wieku młodzieńczym jest (...) wielkim ułatwieniem w codziennym życiu seniora”.

<sup>11</sup> Translation from Polish. Original quotation: „(...) nad sobą, może spojrzy w lustro, by od tego z przeciwnika dowiedzieć się prawdy o sobie (...) I niech pamięta, że świat niewiele sobie robi z tego, że my się na niego obrażamy. Życie nie stanie obok, by poczekać, aż zmądrzejemy”.

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## **The image of old age in selected cultural texts – an analysis of middle school textbooks for Polish classes<sup>1</sup>**

### **Streszczenie**

Prezentowany tekst dotyczy obrazu starości w podręcznikach gimnazjalnych w zakresie kształcenia literacko-kulturowego. Wyodrębnione zostały na trzy obszary opisu: fizyczny, psychiczny, duchowy.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

starość, podręcznik, gimnazjum, teksty kultury

### **Abstract**

The presented text concerns the image of old age in middle school textbooks for literary and cultural education. It is separated into three areas of description: physical, mental, and spiritual.

### **Key words:**

old age, textbook, middle school, cultural texts

A student's work with his/her schoolbook is one of the most important ways of knowledge acquisition and consolidation. The main role of a textbook is its informative function which provides a student with information designated by the teaching programme. It also stimulates the learning process. A schoolbook may be a certain kind of a guide in a student's exploration of the world.

It's also worth mentioning that Polish language lessons do not only fall under the scope of subject education. The new assignments of Polish language education in middle school were clearly incorporated in new textbooks for Polish language teaching. Their purpose is not only literary or linguistic education but also cultural education of pupils. Polish language classes are therefore an important area of creation of life attitudes and value systems, as well as the implementation of the rules of social life (Podemska-Kałuża 2010: 255).

The knowledge of culture should help young people in better understanding of its various manifestations. According to Anna Janus-Sitarz, "teaching openness towards

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<sup>1</sup> This Article is based on research carried out in the framework of the thesis titled *The Image of old age in middle school textbooks for literary and cultural education* written at the Institute of Education at University of Szczecin under the direction of Dr. Lidia Marek. The analysis was performed on 25 middle school textbooks for literary-cultural education of classes 1-3 of middle school. The list of the analyzed textbooks is located in the bibliography.

different conventions in art is over time likely to result in an attitude of openness towards others” (Janus-Sitarz 2004: 10). The image of old age that emerges from various cultural texts represented in middle school textbooks is an example of attitudes towards old age and its problems.

The described portrayal of old age can be broken down into three spheres: physical, mental and spiritual. The breakdown into the three indicated description fields of old age results from the characteristics of the aging process. Each of the separate areas draws attention to specific problems of old age:

- texts on the image of physical ageing refer to the experience of physical degradation of the body, often associated with disease and deteriorating of well-being,
- reflections on the portrayal of old age connected with the mental sphere of human life relate to characteristics, skills and intellectual and emotional competence,
- the last area concerns the image of old age in the spiritual realm, which refers to moral and religious values; this sphere is often accompanied by reflections on the meaning of life and death.

Holding on to the breakdown into the three separate spheres of description, it is worth noting that the features of physical, mental and spiritual sphere could usually be extracted from individual texts. The texts described below have been selected in order to show the rich diversity of aspects and complexity of this issue. Let us look then at the content of school textbooks, bearing in mind the following question: What is the picture of old age portrayed in middle school textbooks?

## 1. The image of old age in the physical sphere

The image of old age in the physical sphere emerging from texts of middle school textbooks is diverse. It relates primarily to the appearance of an old man. We can find the image of an old father in Rembrandt’s picture *Return of the Prodigal Son* [SnCz, class 1, p. 17]<sup>2</sup>. Both the picture and the biblical parable create the image of an old father as caring, experienced, wise and gracious, and forgiving (white hair and a beard constituting a metaphor for these features).

Stereotypically gray hair, a long beard, and wrinkles are associated with wisdom and experience. The stereotype is challenged in the satire of Ignatius Krasicki *To the King* [Mn, class 3, p. 108–109]:

*because gray hair possesses talents,  
because in wrinkles lives the mind, and where the beard is gray,  
all perfection must exist.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In brackets I give abbreviated titles of the textbooks and a description of the corresponding sources in the bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Own translation, original version:

*Wszak siwizna zwyczajnie talenta posiada,*

The author, by using irony, insinuates that in fact old age with its physical symptoms does not bear any special advantages. The wisdom and dignity were imputed as top-down, creating a stereotypical image of old age. However we must remember that stereotyping is an unauthorized, logical assignation of identical characteristics of each person belonging to a particular group, regardless of real, existing differences (Aronson 2002: 282). Old age in the physical aspect of old age is also associated with the weakening of body strength along with health deterioration and impairment of self-reliant movement. This issue was shown in the poem of Mark Skwarnicki *Conversation with the boy who is taking out a thorn from his leg* [PzCz, class 3, p. 211].

The main character of this poem compares himself to a boy who is pulling a thorn from his leg. Both suffer and limp, but for different reasons. The physical characteristics represented in this piece are slow movements, pain, weakness and loss of strength. Old age appears in the poem as a period of passivity and resignation. The old man can no longer take full part in social life; “the games and dances of the spring woods” are no longer for him. Old age is like a thorn – it deprives one of physical abilities, restricts, and is connected with pain and suffering.

Along with age progression certain senses get worse. In the poem *Eyes* by Czesław Miłosz [Jest, kl. 1, cz. 2, s. 125] we read:

*My most honorable eyes. You are not in the best shape.  
I receive from you an image, less than sharp,  
And if a colour, then it's dimmed (...)  
Now what you have seen is hidden inside  
And changed into memory or dreams  
Slowly I move away from the fairness of the world  
And I notice in myself a distaste  
For monkeyish dresses, shrieks, and drum beats.  
What a relief (...)*<sup>4</sup>

Paradoxically, the weakening of sight is not a burden for the lyrical I, but rather a gift. “The world’s fairness” does no longer tempt through colour, shape or glamour.

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*Wszak w zmarszczkach rozum mieszka, a gdzie broda siwa,  
Tam wszelka doskonałość zwyczajnie przebywa.*

<sup>4</sup> Translated, from the Polish, by the author, Carol Miłosz, and Renata Gorczyńska, <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=2002-08-19#folio=076>. Retrived August 16, 2013.

Polish version:

*Szanowne moje oczy, nie najlepiej z wami.  
Dostaję od was rysunek nieostry,  
A jeżeli kolor, to przymgłony (...)  
Teraz coście widziały, schowane jest we mnie  
I przemienione w pamięć albo sny.  
Oddalam się powoli od jarmarku świata  
I zauważam w sobie jakby niechęć  
Do małpowatych strojów, wrzasków, bicia w bębny.  
Co za ulga (...)*

The more hazy the protagonist's physical vision becomes, the sharper his spiritual powers get, leading him in the direction of metaphysical exploration of his core (Zarębianka 2006: 483).

We can find rebellion against the stereotypical perception of old age in the physical sphere in the passage of Esther Vilar's piece *Old age is beautiful* [Jest, class 1, part 2, p. 120]. The author points out that contemporary culture with its cult of youth and beauty somehow puts an equal sign between the following words: young = beautiful; old = ugly.

*You're saying that you want to give us youth, but then when you're palming all these wonderful anti-aging agents off on us, you mean nothing more than the word "young" means "beautiful" and the word "old" means "ugly". And if we continue to follow your recommendations, if we let you rejuvenate us, it will mean that we accept your views.*

*But we don't!*

*We don't want to get rejuvenated!*

*We are old!*

*OLD.*

*And that's why we will change the world so the word OLD means BEAUTIFUL.<sup>5</sup>*

There is an objection to the contemporary culture that revolves around youth, beauty and success. It relegates old age with its experience and maturity to the margins, or hides it under layers of creams, powders and other "elixirs of longevity".

## 2. The image of old age in the mental sphere

Old age is often associated with passivity, resignation and lack of motivation for activity. The main character of the Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* ignores the basic principles of nutrition, hygiene and dress, and does not care about his health. He is taken care of by a boy who meets the basic needs of the old fisherman.

*(...) "I go now for the sardines," the boy said.*

*When the boy came back the old man was asleep in the chair and the sun was down. The boy took the old army blanket off the bed and spread it over the back of the chair and over the old man's shoulders. [ŚWS, class 2, p. 88]*

<sup>5</sup> Own translation; Polish version:

*Mówicie, że chcecie nam podarować młodość, ale przecież kiedy wciskacie nam te wszystkie cudowne odmładzające środki, nie twierdzicie nic ponad to, że słowo "młody" oznacza "piękny", a słowo "stary" oznacza "brzydki". I jeśli będziemy dalej stosować się do waszych zaleceń, jeśli będziemy dawać się wam odmładzać, będzie to znaczyć, że akceptujemy wasze poglądy.*

*A my ich nie akceptujemy!*

*Nie chcemy się odmładzać!*

*Jesteśmy starzy.*

*STARZY.*

*I dlatego zmienimy świat, żeby słowo STARY znaczyło PIĘKNY.*

The quoted passage shows an old man as a person that requires special care and protection. Manolin, an old friend of Santiago's, is very responsible for his age. The discussed section of the story is to be considered in the context of the entire piece, in order to see the complexity and ambiguity of the old fisherman's disposition. The character of old Santiago is an example that proves that passion and the setting of life goals can be a source of motivation and strength to battle fate. The old fisherman comes close to death, and this experience teaches him how precious life is and how important it is to find sense in it. *A man is not made for defeat* – says Santiago. *A man can be destroyed but not defeated*. The key statement made by the protagonist about the meaning of life shows that a man has great potential, regardless of age.

The conservative views of the older generation and the youth's rebellion against it is one of the main topics of old age as motif in literature. Adam Mickiewicz gave full expression to this thought in *Ode to youth*, [Swoimi, class 3, p. 179]. The poem describes the contrast between the world of the young and the world of the old. The opposition between old age and youth is strongly associated with the antagonism between a classical and romantic view of life. In Mickiewicz's piece age is attributed to the bygone era of the Enlightenment, and is represented by people *without heart, without soul*. In their context, we see the image of an old man with wrinkled forehead, who in his perception of the world is limited by his age:

*Who by his elder age shall darkened be  
His toilsome forehead to the ground bent low,  
Let him no more perceive or know  
Than his thus lowered selfish eyes may see*<sup>6</sup>

Youth is full of options, and it can reach new goals, pursue, acquire, and "rise above". The world of the old is covered with fog, an *area of sloth drowned in the abyss*<sup>7</sup>. While describing it, the poet reaches for elements of ugliness and says that the old man is covered with *dead waters*. Old age has to go away and allow youth to develop and build a new reality. A youth that creates, develops and explores new paths is also shown in Adam Asnyka's poem *To the young* [Swoimi, class 2, p. 210]. The poet, by showing the tasks and challenges awaiting the young generation, gives them a lesson in humility and respect towards traditions and past eras:

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<sup>6</sup> *Selected Masterpieces of Polish Poetry*, translated by J. Zawadzki, <http://tlumacz-literatury.pl/polishpoetryfree.pdf>,

Original version:

*Niechaj, kogo wiek zamroczy,  
Chyląc ku ziemi poradłone czoło,  
Takie widzi świata koło,  
Jakie tępyimi zakreśla oczy.*

<sup>7</sup> A. Mickiewicz, *Ode to youth*, in: *Selected Masterpieces of Polish Poetry*, translated by J. Zawadzki, <http://tlumacz-literatury.pl/polishpoetryfree.pdf>.

*But trample not the altars of the past!  
Although you shall much finer domes erect.  
The holy flames upon the stones still last,  
And human love lives there and guards them fast,  
And them you owe respect!*<sup>8</sup>

Old age, symbolized in the poem by the altars of the past, is a valuable source of knowledge and experience. The values that flow from it, although they may seem old-fashioned to young people, constituted the meaning of life for the last generation and so they must not be trampled upon. Youth does not last forever, so it is important to benefit from not forgetting about the past generation and its teachings.

In Martin Kuckenburg's text *Before writing was born* [Jest, class 3, part 1, p. 22] we find the proverb "Every old man who dies in Africa, is a library that burns". For illiterate cultures the memory of the elderly was the only source of knowledge and transmitter of cultural traditions. In today's information society, the development of new technologies is significantly overtaking the older generation. What is more, modern humans do not have to care about memory, because they have stored memory at hand in the form of books, hard drives and CDs.

Old age, although often described in a stereotypical way, does not need to be without a meaning of life and motivation for activity. The main characters of the poem *A tale of grandmothers* by Józef Baran know it well [J. Polski, class 1, p. 41]:

*they are born for the third time  
in the halo of silver hair  
and learn from grandchildren  
how to take first steps  
then they join them at the communion  
it is hard to imagine  
that once they were not grandmothers  
immortal in their serenity  
that shone, shine, and will shine  
even if everything were to change for good  
their husbands are long gone  
or having gorged on life*

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<sup>8</sup> *Selected Masterpieces of Polish Poetry*, translated by J. Zawadzki, <http://tlumacz-literatury.pl/polishpoetryfree.pdf>,

Original version:

*Ale nie deptacie przeszłości ołtarzy,  
Choć macie sami doskonalsze wznieść;  
Na nich się jeszcze święty ogień żarzy  
I miłość ludzka stoi tam na straży,  
I wy winniście im cześć!*

*in disgust are facing the music*<sup>9</sup>

The protagonists of the poem find themselves in a newly-assigned social role – the role of grandmothers. Once they were children, then mothers; now, with the birth of their grandchildren, they begin their third incarnation. In Baran’s poem one can find elements of prefigurative culture (the elderly learn from the young). The grandmothers learn their first steps from their grandchildren. This allows them not to lose contact with reality, and to keep up with the changing world. This third incarnation of the grandmothers gives them new strengths and a new energy for life (Róžańska 2006: 655). They feel needed and loved, *immortal in their serenity* – always full of patience, joy and smiles. The grandmothers in Baran’s poem break the stereotype of decrepit old women, and show that in old age one can be also full of energy and joy.

### 3. The image of old age in the spiritual sphere

With age, habit and stabilization become increasingly important. One no longer looks with youthful impetuosity for new sensations; the lust for adventure diminishes. It is a time for reflection and contemplation on the meaning of life. In her late works, Anna Legeżyńska notices a characteristic motif of old age, namely a gesture of farewell (Legeżyńska 1999: 20). Old people part with youth, with relatives, with the world. This “gesture of farewell” is sometimes very painful, because people have to face the most difficult life experiences: dying, suffering and death. In the face of these extreme situations, spiritual reflections on the balance of life become a significant existential experience in old age (Gleń: 2008).

Usually it appears in conjunction with the theme of death and dying. In literary texts in school textbooks, rather than speaking directly about old age, the theme of *vani-tas* is explored instead.

As Jan Kochanowski said in its epigram *About human life* [SnCZ, class 1, p. 149]:

*There’s nothing certain in the world,  
In vain one tries to rule.*

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<sup>9</sup> Own translation; original version:  
*rodzą się po raz trzeci  
w aureoli srebrnych włosów  
i uczą od wnucząt  
stawiania pierwszych kroków  
potem przystępują z nimi do komunii  
wprost trudno sobie wyobrazić  
że nie były kiedyś babciami  
nieśmiertelnymi w swej pogodzie  
które świeciły, świecą i świecić będą  
choćby się wszystko zmieniło na amen  
mężów ich dawno już nie ma  
albo przejeźdzeni życiem  
z niesmakiem dopijają nawarzone piwo*

*Nobility, beauty, power, money, fame,  
All this will pass away like fields of grass;*<sup>10</sup>

fleeting. There is nothing certain in the world. In one instance such unequal goods as money and fame, beauty and nobility are evoked. This combination performs the function of an unusual hyperbole, which intensifies the sense of the futility of human life.

The theme of *vanitas* (Latin for vanity) is a religious-artistic theme of art, cognizance and time. This motif is most prominent in the Middle Ages and the Baroque, although the fascination with death and dying is reflected in art and literature in different eras.

A reflection on dying appears in Czesław Miłosz's poem *What books* [Bs, class 1, p. 38]. A man's dying is compared to the durability of books:

*[...] We exist – they said, even as their pages were getting ripped out  
Or the letters were licked off by the roaring flames.  
How much more durable than us, whose crippled heat  
Cools down with memory, disperses, perishes.  
I imagine the earth when I'm gone  
And no, no loss, continuous oddity...*<sup>11</sup>

Human physicality is imperfect, with ageing one's memory gets worse and the body "disperses", as it slowly dies. Human's life is a trifle, after one's death there will be "no loss" on earth; the world will continue its rhythm.

A beautiful portrayal of maturation to old age can be found in a passage of the book *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt [BS, class 2, p. 275]. While the main character is a boy of ten, it is he who gives a very important lesson in preparing for old age. In the face of an extreme situation, namely death, his experience is similar to what elderly people go through. The initial protest and refusal to leave this world are overcome, paradoxically, as the boy matures into old age.

Oscar is a very mature boy. His reflections on life and death lead him to a very important conclusion: old age, as no other stage of life, appreciates the beauty and the meaning of human existence. Such an attitude requires a major effort. One has to overcome

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<sup>10</sup> Own translation; original version:

*Nie masz na świecie żadnej pewnej rzeczy,  
Próżno tu człowiek ma co mieć na pieczy.  
Zacność, uroda, moc, pieniądze, sława,  
Wszystko to minie jako polna trawa;*

<sup>11</sup> Own translation, original version:

*[...] Jesteśmy — mówiły, nawet kiedy wydzierano z nich karty  
Albo litery zlizywał buzujący płomień.  
O ileż trwalsze od nas, których ułomne ciepło  
Stygnie razem z pamięcią, rozprasza się, ginie.  
Wyobrażam sobie ziemię kiedy mnie nie będzie  
I nic, żadnego ubytku, dalej dziwowisko, [...]*

the fear of nearing death, and take advantage of every moment of life; one has to become a gourmet of life.

The spiritual sphere of old age is connected with the mystery of cognizance of the world and the values that life brings with it. Often in the face of death come reflections on life and its meaning and sense. In this sphere we find the image of religion as well as old people's attitude towards God and faith. Although it may initially take the form of rebellion and disapproval of death, it is often the case that prayer and God's guidance bring serenity and a sense of meaning to life.

#### **4. What is the portrayal of old age in middle school textbooks?**

On the basis of the selected texts described above we can conclude that middle school textbooks display various embodiments of the motif of old age. In physical terms ageing is a disease, lack of strength, and helplessness. The image of old age in the mental sphere is associated with a sense of loneliness and misunderstanding. One can also see the distance between generations, which is characterized by a rebellion of the youth against the norms and principles of the elderly. The theme of life balance, summaries, settlement and reflections on death are characteristic of the spiritual realm. Elderly people are often portrayed as religious and having a strong long-established system of values. The knowledge and experience of elderly people are also highlighted.

It is worth pointing out, however, that texts concerning old age and ageing quite rarely appear in middle school textbooks and do not function independently (the theme of old age is usually associated with intergenerational relationships and the subject of death and dying). Quite often the discussed texts treat the theme of old age in a stereotypical way. However, most importantly, the image of old age included in the analyzed texts can contribute to a deeper reflection on old age and its place in modern society. The motif of old age in the cultural texts of education was obviously not exhaustively examined in this study. It is therefore worth paying attention to the texts presented to young people and the possibility of using various forms of media to shape positive attitudes towards old age. Taking up this subject can help in better understanding the needs and desires of the elderly.

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# **Fashion and old age. Paradox or tactic of negotiating normality**

## **Streszczenie**

Moda w społeczeństwach późno-nowoczesnych przeszła szereg zmian. Jednak nadal jest mechanizmem tworzenia i odtwarzania różnic społecznych. Autorów interesują linie demarkacyjne, do jakich utworzenia i podtrzymywania przyczyniła i przyczynia się moda. Zwłaszcza te związane z ciałem i wiekiem. Moda jest źródłem asymetrii generacyjnych, sposobem wykluczania z uczestnictwa w kulturze i społeczeństwie z racji wieku i cielesności. Jej paradoksalna natura sprawia, że ten aspekt jest niezauważany i naturalizowany. W nieco lepszej sytuacji znajdują się osoby niepełnosprawne. Ich obecność w tym polu jest przynajmniej sprawcą semantycznego zamieszania, nowych taktyk negocjowania normalności i przedmiotem naukowej refleksji.

## **Słowa klucze:**

moda, ubiór, starość, negocjowanie normalności

## **Abstract**

Fashion in postmodern societies has gone through a series of changes. However, it remains a mechanism for producing and reproducing social differences. The authors of this paper are interested in the demarcation lines created by the fashion industry, especially those which are related to the body and age. Fashion is a source of generational asymmetry and of exclusions from participation in culture and society, based on age and bodily presentation. Its paradoxical nature renders it unnoticeable and naturalized. The disabled are in a somewhat better situation. Their presence in the domain of fashion causes at least some semantic commotion, generates new tactics of reaching normality and becomes a subject for scholarly reflection.

## **Key words:**

fashion, clothing, old age, negotiation of normality

## **1. Fashion, clothing and age**

Fashion is a polysemantic and broad notion. In our paper, it will be used in a more specific sense; we will understand fashion as clothing design which causes social interest and response. At the moment, when new designs are adopted by some social group and become fashionable (as defined above), it initiates imitation and evolves into stylizations which give people an opportunity for self-expression. Whether we like it or not, fashion

is to a great extent instrumental in the formation of social differences. It is a mechanism of inclusion, exclusion and localization. To this end, it makes use of the intimate relations between clothing, identity and belonging to social classes and groups. Wearing specific clothes constitutes “the empirical reality of dressed bodies” (Twigg 2009: 1). It also serves many functions. Besides prosaic protection against cold weather, it allows for the preservation of respect toward one’s own and others’ intimacy. It is also ornamental and as such may attract the interest of a potential sexual partner. It also, however, communicates social position and rank, and reflects the values and worldviews of the wearer. Specific outfits can be misleading and make the wearer look older or younger (as long as he or she remains dressed...). However, “clothed” is not synonymous with “fashionable”. It is relevant in the context of the category of age, which is our concern. Older people are not the target market of fashion designers or the fashion industry, which ignores old age. This does not change the fact that older people remain dressed and have to make choices about what to wear. Old people are a part of the social reality which has created fashion and consumption as a form of socio-cultural participation. One can legitimately say that this state of affairs results in exclusions and the marginalization of old age. Paradoxically, it is a dynamic which is present in ageing societies. In the case of women, worship of youth, also as expressed in dressing styles, can deprive people of the very self-expression which is so highly valued and praised in our culture. In comparison with the abundance of other difficulties faced by older people (especially in Polish everyday life), this issue may appear irrelevant. However, we represent the point of view that small and seemingly insignificant occurrences can be camouflaged signals of relevant and broader socio-cultural tendencies.

## **2. Fashion in the postmodern world**

As the rivalry between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy elevated the position of fashion, it became one of the most relevant and characteristic phenomena of contemporary societies (Krajewski 2005: 66–67). Since then, many changes have occurred. The most important of these changes are:

- autonomization (relative independence from other domains and the development of specific codes of communication),
- democratization (the availability of a variety of social categories as the result of the improvement of the lower classes’ economic situation and technological advancements),
- a focus on ornamentation and beautification (specifically with respect to visual self-presentation; earlier it was a clear indication of class differences that were of the utmost importance),

- an appeal to identity codes (outward appearance is not an accurate replica of social identity any more),
- use of egalitarian language within the field of fashion (its assumptions and categories refer to the ideal: a society composed of individuals capable of making independent decisions and with equal opportunities),
- decentralization (various classes have their own elites to follow; street style has come into existence),
- lastly, reversed direction of imitation (i.e. from bottom to top, although top-to-bottom imitation still occurs). (Szlendak, Pietrowicz 2007)

These changes have triggered relevant consequences for fashion as a tool of class positioning, and for objects used as markers of social status, but they have not led to the loss of previously established mechanisms. Wealth and consumption still remain central to fashion, as do body, gender, and generational differences. We can still observe the demarcation lines previously established by fashion; we can still see it maintain regulation, control and social distances. Fashion still supports and replicates social order in the context of class, gender, generation and consumption. What has changed is that to some observers the differentiations are not as explicit as they were some time ago.

### **3. Fashion and old age**

Clothing, body and age are closely interconnected. Clothes form an envelope, which contains the body, covers it, protects it and presents it to the world. The body makes the clothing alive and individual. Age is inseparably bound to the body. So far, ageing is not optional and it indicates that there are limits to the body's plasticity; it may turn into resisting and decaying matter. This could happen due to ongoing illness, extreme physical strain or paralyzing fear. However, in this paper we are concerned with a body which is fully functional physically and mentally, but has begun to change in appearance. Such changes place it in the domain of specific cultural meanings and patterns, which determine social roles. There is nothing unusual about it. This rule applies to every age group, but the case of old people is different in a few interesting ways. Firstly, roles determined by old age can limit people's repertoire of behaviour and experience. We assume that changes in appearance cause alterations in the identity of the subject. This is why, if we ignore meanings and social patterns related to ageing, we can fall into the trap of stigmatization and marginalization. People can even lose their status of normal, trustworthy individuals, and become grotesque creatures. Clothing contributes to this process by playing a role in generational demarcation. The most important of these borders separates children from adults. It is marked by cut and colour. Sweet little dresses in bright colours are suitable for little girls, but not for adult women. Some time ago, an equally definite border ran between adulthood and old age. Certain types of clothing

were perceived as appropriate for older women: longer skirts or dresses, sleeves that cover the arms and shoulders, and garments that cover the neck and neckline. Subdued colours were obligatory. Such an outfit, which avoids bodily exposition and sexual ostentation, conveys modesty, dignity, distance, and partial withdrawal (very similar rules applied and still apply to corpses in coffins). Some of these rules still function. Researchers believe that nowadays, generational ordering is as influential in fashion as class hierarchies were in the past. “Styles now diffuse down the age hierarchy, as they once did down the class hierarchy” (Twigg 2009: 7). The association between unfashionable clothing and old age is a result of the very limited selection of garments marketed toward the older generation. It may even be called gerontophobic fashion. Secondly, social inscription of bodily appearance does not result in automatic mental transformation. Older people can be more or less aware of changes and socio-cultural directives. At times, we can observe older men and women who dress and behave as if they were biologically young. However, it is very difficult to assess whether what we observe is rooted in lack of insight concerning ongoing changes and/or lack of social awareness of socio-cultural imperatives, or whether it is the result of a consciously chosen resistance strategy against the idealization of youthful appearance. If it is due to the former, the subject’s advanced age would be visible only from the perspective of others, and not from the point of view of the subject. The latter seems to be a very demanding strategy. Since the preservation of a slim and muscular body is one of the resistance strategies against old age (a lean body is associated with youthful appearance and with early pre-maternal adolescence and physical attractiveness in both sexes), it requires a huge amount of discipline and effort at the stage of menopause and andropause. It is, however, a socially effective and potentially rewarding strategy, at least up to a certain point. The subject’s choice of clothing entails risk, since social reception of the attempted imitation of younger age is much less favourable. Wearing tight and revealing clothing and breaking colour conventions are very often seen as failed attempts at regaining one’s youth. Social judgements in such cases are usually harsh. Older royalty, who are allowed to appear in public in brightly coloured costumes, seem to constitute an intriguing exception to this rule. Thirdly, social bodily inscriptions may cause transformation of internal personal space. The acceptance of externally imposed categories, programming experiences, emotions and behaviours varies in terms of range and can reach different levels. It is often said by people from different age groups that old bodies are non-aesthetic. This results in an expectation that old people have to dress carefully. Bodily exposure must be avoided. In such cases, clothing is more than a mere wrapping; it becomes a cover or a hideaway. Ageing bodies go through a process of slow seclusion, until clothing finally becomes the *anachoresis* of the old body. So it seems that clothing plays a relevant role, as it sets limits to *anachoresis*, discrimination and exclusion from public space. Here, age-appropriate fashionable clothing can enable public participation. Contemporary voices often admit that people in

the autumn of their lives should have access to such domains as consumption and fashion. One could ask where the problem lies. One problem arises out of a confusion between fashion and clothing. Clothing as “the empirical reality of dressed bodies” is a part of older people’s life experience. They wear clothes and make choices about them, yet their options are very restricted. Younger age groups have access to a larger and more diverse range of garments. Getting dressed does not equal being fashionable. The fashion world seems to be uncomfortable with or even frightened of the elderly. The fashion world plays with taboo and pushes limits, at times engaging in risky and very controversial projects. In well-known fashion magazines, we can find photographs of children stylized as adult and sexualized individuals – within a culture where the taboo on child sexuality carries the status of divine dogma, and sexual activity is perceived as the most important verge of adulthood. On catwalks, models openly present physical disability, transvestitism, and transsexual preferences, but the ungracefully aged are banned from such places. From time to time, on the front cover of “style bibles” like *Vogue* or *Harp-er’s Bazaar*, readers can see photos of pop stars in their 40s, 50s and 60s. It is calculated that the age of front-page celebrities has been raised during the last decade by 10 to 15 years, and teenage models are supplanted by mature women – mainly actresses and singers. However, a single gaze at such pictures reveals extensive use of Photoshop. Real age has disappeared; it has been neutralized like an unpleasant smell.

#### **4. Paradox or negotiation of normality?**

Disabled people have entered the world of fashion, and this unusual encroachment was quickly noticed by researchers. Up to now, attempts by non-normative bodies to appear in media within the domain of fashion have been treated as ways of renegotiating normality and reacting against exclusion (Vainshtein 2012). Not everyone agrees with this point of view. Sarah Heiss (2011) does not deny that domains can become dehermetized, but she voices some doubts by saying that what we observe in the case of disability is rather an ideology of naïve integration at work. What can be said of the same phenomenon with respect to old people? Is it semantic confusion, deconstruction of old age, distortion of reality or some kind of satire or grotesque? Distortions are certainly present. One can find them at the level of language (magazines advising people in their 60s, 70s or even 80s on how to be fashionable like using the term “middle aged woman”) and image (the photographed bodies meet the requirements of cultural norms, but a slim build is accessible to very few older people, due to hormonal changes, the accumulation of fatty tissue, the lowering of the uterus, etc.). Maybe it is related “to wider set of social processes whereby individuals in modern societies are less age differentiated across the life span. Midlife becomes an extended plateau reaching higher and higher up the age span” (Twigg 2009: 9). The presented stylizations are equally problematic. The majority

of clothing ranges aimed at older buyers do not create a new pattern of appeal, but rather copy trends and styles targeting young people. This transplantation of trends and styles into a different age category has (not too surprisingly) rather grotesque effects. This kind of course of action should be seen as one more marker of the dominance of youth. Elderly people do not only use clothing as a prop to portray age. It is significant to what extent older people are capable of enacting their age with the use of various and progressively “younger” outfits. In this regard we agree with Julia Twigg (*ibid.*): “I would suggest that once again the physicality of the body comes into play. Youthfulness is not just a product of performance. Adopting youthful styles is not necessarily a route to appearing young, and is sometimes the reverse. Indeed exaggeratedly youthful styles can point up age, exposing the disjuncture between the expectations of the dress and the aged body that wears it”.

In consumer culture, fashion is presented as a useful tool for the creation of an individual, unique version of the “self” through the consumption of goods. Let us pass over the fact that this aspect of clothing and agency implanted in clothing is grossly overestimated. A short walk on the streets of any big or small European city shows how similar people look in contemporary society. This is partly due to the obvious fact that most of us buy our clothes in shops, where what we can see in the shop window depends on mass production and the dictum of fashion dictators. It also indicates how narrow the margin of our self-expression is. Conformity and order are at least as relevant as agency and choice. Wearing clothing that is appropriate to a given occasion and to one’s age is of major importance. A long time ago, Simmel (2006) pointed at specific competing tendencies within the domain of fashion, namely equalization and differentiation, or fitting into a specific frame of reference and falling outside of it. The newly established connection between clothing on one hand and expression, identity and choice on the other – coupled with a lack of interest in the fashion industry among the elderly – makes those categories, which are relevant for contemporary societies, very problematic in the eyes of old people. It is not clear what kind of clothing is age-appropriate for them. The difficulty of choosing appropriate clothing and the fear of making a mistake constitute a part of many women’s shopping experience (Twigg 2009: 4). These problems can be avoided by following the traditional guidelines of style, as professional stylists do. Finally, the older buyer’s choices are limited to bad taste, dullness and infantilization, or inspiration taken from tradition. Yet the situation is more complicated than that. Firstly, cultural differences play a relevant role. Secondly, there are fashion blogs, ran by young professionals, which expose the beauty of this phase of life as inscribed in clothing. Thirdly, for the fashion industry “this shift to a destructured, non-age ordered market is certainly how the fashion industry likes to present the issue; though this may reflect the wish to avoid negative messages through overt labelling of clothes in age terms” (*ibid.*: 6).

## **5. Final remarks**

The issues presented in this paper can be interpreted in at least two contradictory ways. (*ibid.*: 10) Firstly, one may claim that the development of consumer culture gives the older generation open access to self-expression and identity formation. Supporters of this point of view indicate that consumption creates a solid base for social integration and is a source of pleasure and of identities. This is why its extension to advanced age groups leads to the integration of older people within mainstream culture. In relation to clothing, it denotes the decline of a culture of old age categorization and its colourless, grey and gloomy tastelessness. In their opinion, there is no reason for older people not to wear the same clothing or not to shop in the same fashionable shopping centres as younger people. Especially for women, it means liberation from negative prescriptions concerning sexuality and outward appearance, and escape from the tight grasp of moralistic language. It offers them the possibility to continue their earlier sense of self in the context of a 'women's culture of pleasure in clothing'. When one looks at the issue from this perspective, there seems to be no reason why older women should be exiled from this area of aesthetic pleasure. It represents the view that there are grounds for thinking that significant cultural changes have occurred in this matter. However, we should carefully record the disappearing evidence of age categorization. Additionally, consumption relies on income (wealthy older people have it, others do not), and for many decades the fashion world has been reproducing segregation between wealthy and poor. As such it is strongly defined by parameters that are out of reach to many elderly people.

The second approach provides a much more complex analysis, backed by research. Old people talk negatively about their own bodies, which are perceived as non-aesthetic, disappointing, dysfunctional, and the source of negative sensations (like pain or fear). Hence it seems better to separate and compartmentalize the self and the body (Banaszak, Florkowski 2010: 42). Advocates of this point of view point out that being (after a certain age) socially and culturally transparent has its advantages, especially when considering the constantly growing demands imposed on young men and women regarding the construction of desirable social images. Finally, one can escape from the restrictive hold of physicality. It does not have to stand in opposition to the enjoyment which one can draw from clothing. A beautiful, well-fitting outfit can become a source of pleasure, and a positive evaluation of it can provide the wearer an opportunity to achieve embodied identity. In other words, it creates a chance for negotiation of normality. However, in this context it gains a lot of significance, and failures may be seen as more important than they seemed at first glance. Adoption of new fashion styles, or just the avoidance of those tainted with ageing, can assist the wearer in achieving both self-presentation that is less defined by age, and the above-mentioned benefits inscribed in the last stage of life. Although age is a key social issue, it is naturalized and invisible. It is very similar to

the treatment of gender concerns some years ago. We do not appreciate its significance and there is not enough focus on these matters.

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# **Activity and lifestyles in old age**



## **Limited public and private space for Polish retirees**

### **Streszczenie**

Limitowana przestrzeń publiczna i prywatna polskich emerytów

W artykule przedstawione zostały przykłady zjawiska limitowania przestrzeni społecznej osobom w starszym wieku. Zjawisko to przybiera postać ukrytej dyskryminacji, a jej występowanie wobec polskich emerytów jest szczególnie wyraźne w tak ważnych rolach, jak: rola pacjenta, pracownika i konsumenta usług opiekuńczych. W artykule przyjęto, że limitowanie przestrzeni jest uzurpowaniem sobie prawa przez instytucje, zbiorowości społeczne, grupy społeczne czy kręgi społeczne do rozstrzygnięcia o zakresie swobody innych jednostek. Limitowanie roli społecznej to ograniczanie komuś możliwości wyboru roli oraz dyktowanie jej zakresu. Limitowanie przestrzeni w granii roli społecznej, to dzielenie się przestrzenią (rozumianą jako aktywność, role, funkcje, zadania itp.) w sposób nie zawsze sprawiedliwy i nie zawsze uzasadniony. W przypadku osób w starszym wieku, ograniczanie dotyczy tych sfer życia, do których pragnęłyby one mieć szerszy dostęp, ze względu na specyficzne potrzeby związane z kondycją psychofizyczną oraz wynikające z ich statusu ekonomicznego.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

dyskryminacja, limitowanie praw, ograniczanie wyborów życiowych

### **Abstract**

This article presents selected examples of the phenomenon of limiting social space for elderly people. This phenomenon takes the form of covert discrimination. Discrimination against Polish retirees is particularly evident in relation to such important roles as the role of the patient, employee, and social care client.

### **Key words:**

discrimination, limiting someone's rights, limiting the possibilities for playing social roles

The main aim of this paper is to present manifestations of the phenomenon of setting limits on what social roles ageing people can assume and of “designating” space for the elderly, who are considered to be representative of a passive generation which is, stereotypically speaking, less able to take on roles and enter domains that are reserved for other age groups. The modest scope of this paper makes it impossible to discuss or document all manifestations of limitations placed on the elderly with regard to the space that is available to them. Therefore, of necessity, the text only presents those which are particularly severe for ageing people and also, in their opinion, unjust.

Limiting this space can also be understood as limiting the possibilities for playing certain social roles, i.e. those which one wants to play and which are compatible with the needs that are specific to a given age group; for example, the role of a recipient, consumer, petitioner, beneficiary, and viewer. Such limitations may also be accompanied by a reluctance to “share a space” related to playing social roles that are a sign of one’s social position and prestige, such as the role of an architect, producer, decision-maker, and actor. The above-mentioned roles are only examples of social and private roles; they have been deliberately juxtaposed and presented as polar opposites according to the level of activity they entail.

Limiting this private space can also be understood as defining the limits of “decency” and limiting the possibilities of deciding one’s own fate independently. Limitations can also be placed with regard to assuming particular roles in marriage and family as well as to making decisions which are “subject to the opinions” of other family members. Generally speaking, limited space in private and public domains means limited possibilities for satisfying one’s needs, restricted access to particular services, and deciding for an individual or a group about their rights and their degree of access to certain forms of social activity. Restricting space for someone in social terms amounts to the usurpation by institutions, social communities and groups or social circles of the right of other individuals or groups to decide on their rights. Limiting the possibilities for someone to take particular social roles also means limiting the choice and defining the scope of opportunities that can be made available to that person according to those who impose said limits. This can also be effected by sharing social space (which is understood as activities, roles, functions or tasks, etc.) in a way that is not always fair and not always justified. As for elderly people, such limitations may be related to those spheres of life to which they would like to gain better access because of their specific needs that are connected with their psychological and physical state, as well as their economic status.

The phenomenon of limiting such space can be associated with discrimination against and the stereotyping of ageing people, which is referred to in the relevant literature as ageism (Stypińska 2010) – the “right” to limit the possibilities for someone to actively play multiple social roles results from stereotypical notions about human capabilities at a given age. This can be seen in the way in which employers, doctors and social politicians behave, as well as in intergenerational relations.

It is also worth taking a closer look at restricted access to various institutions, venues and organizations from the perspective of elderly people’s self-limitation – limitations which are caused by stereotypical notions such as: “it’s not proper”, “it’s no longer appropriate at my age”, “what will others say?”, “you cannot expose yourself to ridicule”, etc. Such self-limitation is the consequence both of fear of a negative social reaction and of an acceptance of stereotypes as norms that define the extent to which it

is desirable for someone to take on particular social roles at a given time. The roles that are regarded as suitable for elderly people entail having fun and enjoying life in moderation. Determining the limits of ageing persons' freedom to design their own lifestyle has always been a part of culture and, especially, of social control. In traditional culture, limiting someone's freedom was one of the principles of community life, whereas limiting one's presence in social space was seen as a sign of becoming socialized into the role of an elderly person.

When analyzing the practice of limiting this space, one can adopt at least two theoretical perspectives which will make it easier to utilize facts, namely social control theory and the theory of social marginalization, which assumes that there are several reasons why it is possible to restrict someone's rights. It puts emphasis on instances of such limitations of rights in specific spheres of life. According to T. Kowalak, marginality is a relative concept which requires reference to other social groups. This, however, raises the question of how to establish a point of reference, i.e. a set of social characteristics, in relation to which a given group could be considered marginal. In his opinion one may determine the extent of marginalization based on the degree to which a given person or social group: a) has no power, rights, freedom of choice, access to material and cultural goods, or opportunity to take a rest; b) is forced into something, discriminated against and/or stigmatized; c) is helpless and deprived of help (Kowalak 1998). This conception seems to be general enough to be used for the purpose of analyzing the phenomenon of limiting private and public space with regard to these three dimensions.

When attempting to characterize examples of the marginalization of ageing people several years ago, I pointed out that the process of marginalizing this age group in Poland was unusual in that it was mostly based on a withdrawal from playing particular social roles and an assumption of roles that were unwanted and socially unacceptable. This is especially true of people who have low income, low aspirations, limited opportunities for self-actualization and a limited influence on their own life, as well as those who are not very self-sufficient physically (Kotlarska-Michalska 2009). When analyzing examples of such marginalization at that time, I pointed to those, the validity of which had been confirmed empirically and which were related to areas of social activity where elderly people were simply ignored, such as education, culture, tourism, fashion, entertainment and politics. I presented most of the empirically confirmed examples of discrimination in that article. In this paper, however, I intend to draw attention to other aspects of this phenomenon that are not formally referred to as discrimination, i.e. the causes, development and consequences of limiting this space, which is understood as allowing people to take on specific social roles under certain conditions.

Limiting such space for Polish retirees begins with a considerable reduction of the possibilities of taking on roles that are a sign of one's social position or of being

active on the labour market, which, in turn, is a factor or one of the factors that limit the possibilities for assuming many other roles in social, family and personal life. Therefore, there is a simple mechanism at work here – low social position “transfers” to limited rights in the private space.

Limiting the range of available roles is an example of limiting the possibilities of fully assuming public roles in the social domain, which is evidenced by the results of numerous research studies on young people’s attitudes toward sharing their professional roles with the elderly. Unemployment among young people fuels their resentment toward ageing people – the young see the fact that retirees hold down their jobs as a barrier to employment.

This resentment may also be related to the private domain. Although there are no available results of sociological research into the extent to which adult children of ageing parents influence their decisions about marriage, retirees very rarely get married. However, the opinions of the few who reported that they were interested in building a life again with someone indicate that an interfering adult child or children prevent them from making such a decision. This facilitates a tendency for elderly people to enter into informal relationships, which are not particularly well tolerated by their children either. Based on demographic research (Kałuza 2010), it can be said that the percentage of senior newlyweds is constantly falling – it was 0.5% for women and 1.5 for men aged 60 and older in 2008. In absolute terms, there were 6,171 men and 2,615 women aged over 60 among newlyweds in 1970, and only 4,293 men and 2,301 women in 2008 (p. 293). Obviously, the decreasing popularity of formalized relationships among people in this age category may also result from the growing popularity of cohabitation, but the very fact that the rate of formalized relationships is declining allows one to adopt a hypothesis that adult people interfere in their parents’ private lives.

As for the private sphere of life, attention should be paid to the ways in which adult children limit the range of roles in the family available to their ageing parents, which the latter are unwilling to admit as they treat it as a kind of educational failure. Adult children’s overprotectiveness toward the elderly can manifest itself in their controlling their parents’ spending, i.e. dictating the way in which they spend their money or even depriving them of the right to choose what to purchase, for example, by helping them with shopping and, at the same time, making decisions for them. Adult children may tell their parents what food, clothes or other daily necessities they should buy. The few studies that have been conducted on forms of psychological violence against the elderly provide evidence that there are various kinds of domestic, intergenerational relations which show that older people’s rights to decide about themselves as well as to self-determination are violated. Limiting elderly people’s autonomy is justifiable to a certain extent when they are seriously ill, but it is undoubtedly an instance of violence when this happens in all of the other, unjustified, cases.

The phenomenon of self-limitation on the part of the elderly may be a consequence of realizing that they are unattractive because of a chronic disease. According to Barbara Uramowska-Żyto (1998), some diseases may cause strong social reactions and, as a result, such persons cannot effectively perform their professional and social functions. The stigma of the disease may cause them to become socially withdrawn and push them to the margins of society, where their illness is not seen as strange, whereas their “self” or their “self-image”, i.e. the way in which they think they are perceived by others, becomes disintegrated. Thus the whole system of interactions and of symbolic communication with the environment that they know is destroyed, and the effects of the long and complicated process of “finding one’s place” in social reality are nullified (p. 84).

Elderly people may also withdraw from social life for many other reasons which are unrelated to their physical state, such as low self-esteem and a sense of having nothing particularly interesting to offer.

Young people see limiting older people’s right to play socially attractive roles as something obvious. Elżbieta Czapka’s (2007) research shows that young students regard the following activities as the most appropriate for the elderly: taking care of grandchildren, meeting with friends, going to health resorts, working in the garden and going to church. More than half of them (54.8%) were inclined to say that professional work was not among activities that were suitable for ageing people. However, the students take a different attitude toward their own old age, which they perceive as an active period of life, i.e. a time when they will be members of a social group and which will be spent at leisure. At the same time they believe that the elderly should first of all fulfill family-related roles (p. 245). However, studies carried out among small segments of the population do not allow one to make generalizations. There are numerous research studies which show that young students have a favourable attitude toward their own grandparents and they do not succumb to stereotypes about old age (Kosior 2007). Many sociological studies have confirmed that people with higher education show greater tolerance and even have a more favourable attitude toward the elderly.

Examples of limiting the private space of older people can be seen not only in the way in which young people dictate what roles the elderly should assume, but also in the way adult children or grandchildren control elderly people’s spending, violate their right to freely express their opinions, impose a given style of clothing especially on older women, control elderly people’s social life, which is especially true in the case of older men, limit their right to have a happy personal life (by refusing to accept their partner), reduce their roles as grandfathers and grandmothers e.g. to the role of a carer but not of an educator, determine desirable forms of activity (e.g. gardening), reduce their role to that of the “retiree in the family”, limit the range of available forms of cultural activity, set limits to their dreams and plans, and impose rules relating to their physical self-sufficiency and the extent of help provided by family members. Many of

these forms of limitation unfortunately bear the hallmarks of psychological and moral violence, which should be regarded as a special kind of intentional actions aimed at limiting the victim's right to self-determination and autonomy. The issue of violence as a specific type of behavior that restricts another person's freedom needs to be dealt with separately. This is also one of the least explored phenomena – especially because this form of domestic violence is carefully concealed.

Manifestations of a willingness to limit the range of possible roles that can be played by the elderly and to set the limits of “apparent decency” may constitute a method of “manageing” old age which does not take into account elderly people's wealth of knowledge, experience and resources and which reduces wrongly understood care to control over older people's lifestyle as well as interference in the intimate spheres of life, out of a well-intentioned concern for their safety and life quality.

Elderly people are among those who are particularly doomed to have no choice – their disability condemns them to be dependent on the staff of a nursing home or other care facilities, or on a family member who reluctantly performs the role of a caregiver and openly emphasizes the “weight” of this burden. Very often survey reports show that elderly nursing home residents have experienced physical and psychological violence, which can be clearly interpreted as limiting people's right to dignity.

When explaining the causes of limitations imposed with regard to the freedom of decision-making and access to social space, one may want to take into consideration those factors which have always been decisive in determining an individual's position within the family and society, i.e. the social, the cultural, the economic, the personal, and the biopsychological (Kotlarska-Michalska 1987). The importance of these factors may change along with the significance of values that play a dominant role in a given culture and also when values that were at the top of the hierarchy for the previous generation have declined in importance. There is no doubt that contemporary technological advancements and computerization condemn elderly people to dependence on the services rendered by the younger generation, which gives young people who instruct the elderly how to use various objects in this technologized world the right to teach and advise them. This relationship is not always equal – the elderly need technical guidance and assistance from younger people, but the latter do not necessarily want to use outdated instructions from the former on how to live, as such principles are out of date, old-fashioned and unsuitable for young people.

Although there are many papers dealing with examples of discrimination against older people, it is worth paying attention to those which are based on reliable empirical research and which will allow one to make generalizations. Among such important sources there is a report entitled „Stop dyskryminacji ze względu na wiek” (*Stop Age Discrimination*), which was prepared by the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland. In the introduction to this report, Barbara Szatur-Jaworska (2005)

lists phenomena that can be regarded as sources of discrimination against the elderly: 1) negative stereotypes about old age; 2) the cult of youth in Polish society; 3) the fact that people holding positions of public trust are facing an ethical crisis (e.g. in the medical professions); 4) a lack of reliable knowledge about old age among employers, decision-makers and those who provide various services to the elderly; 5) the growing unemployment rate, which increases competition in the labour market; 6) a shortage of funds allocated for the purposes of social policy and financial shortages in households; 7) a growing number of specific needs of the elderly (related to health and care); 8) the rules and procedures for applying the law (e.g. the adversarial principle in civil law proceedings); 9) procedures for allocating funds to different social assistance organizations (e.g. those obtained from the National Health Fund *NFZ*); 10) low levels of education and loneliness among the elderly, 11) poor work organization in institutions that provide services to elderly people (lack of comprehensive geriatric care) (p. 9).

Experts unanimously point out that age discrimination has many causes. According to Tomasz Schimanek (2005), the primary causes are the following: a low level of awareness and knowledge of the law; a situation in which shortages in one area are compensated for through changes in another area, i.e. high unemployment leads to the dismissal of people aged over 50; and a dynamic development of modern technologies which causes employers to dismiss persons who find it difficult to learn. In addition, the widespread stereotypes about the elderly are also discouraging for employers. T. Schimanek believes that the enormous technological and ownership-related changes in Polish economy are not conducive to the development of master-pupil relationships, which would allow the elderly to share their experience and professional knowledge with junior employees while also upholding a given company's tradition. Another obstacle is special protection against termination of employment for employees who will be entitled to retirement pension in less than four years, which makes employers reluctant to employ persons for whom the protected period has started or will start soon (p. 37). The above-mentioned factors cause Polish people who are at pre-retirement age and at early retirement age to be the second most professionally passive population in Europe. According to Eurostat's statistics, Poland is among the countries in which people quit the labour market quite early and find it fairly hard to return. In comparison with other countries (p. 40), only 26.1% of people aged 55–64 are employed in Poland, whereas in the European Union the proportion is 38.7%. Sweden (68%), Denmark (57.9%) and Great Britain (53.5%) are countries with the highest employment rate for this age group (p. 41).

According to Iwona Jaroszewska-Ignatowska (2005) the sources of discriminatory practices used by employers against people at retirement age are the following: the employer can choose an employee; the costs of running a business activity are high; there is a stereotypical image of an employee aged over 50; employers are reluctant to comply with the regulations on the protected period; people looking for a job feel worried

or even afraid that they might not find it if they have filed a case against an employer before. Other sources of discrimination include poor knowledge of the law both among employers and employees, as well as the excessive length of court proceedings (from 1.5 to 5 years). Such practices and phenomena make people reluctant to file a case against their employers, and labour courts are likewise reluctant to adjudicate discrimination complaints (pp. 32–33). The low penalties for non-compliance with labour laws give employers the freedom to limit the professional opportunities of people approaching or at retirement age.

Health is another very important sphere of life in which the elderly encounter limitations, as evidenced by the facts cited by Jolanta Twardowska-Rajewska (2005). This author, who is a geriatrician by profession, lists many facts which clearly demonstrate that ageing people have difficulty in gaining access to medical examination and treatment. Instances of limitations placed on the elderly with regard to the role of the patient are all too clear. This is caused by several factors: 1) the pressure to economize that is put on doctors forces them to choose whom to treat; 2) an inadequate system of treatment; 3) too little importance is attached to prevention, as a result of which treatment is of remedial character; 4) there is no coherent system of geriatric care; 5) the National Health Fund puts limitations on funds that are allocated to geriatric care. These are the causes of age-related access barriers to medical examinations, preventive programs and medical procedures and limited access to prostheses and rehabilitation equipment. In accordance with the Ordinance of the President of the National Health Fund, there is an age-related access barrier to preventive health examinations. For example, women aged 25 to 59 can undergo free Pap tests, women aged 50 to 69 can benefit from the program of early breast cancer detection, people aged 50–65 can have a colonoscopy done free of charge, and people aged 40–65 are eligible for free spirometry.

The number of referrals to specialists carrying out such tests is also limited, which is evidenced by facts known from medical practice. J. Twardowska-Rajewska points out that she has seen (during her practice as a geriatrician) doctors refusing referrals to specialists who carry out preventive medical examinations and presenting arguments such as “at this age it does not matter anymore, and young people should be treated first”, whereas a request for a gynecological examination or an examination of the breasts is met with surprise or even disgust on the part of the doctor (p. 51). Such limitations concern all areas of medical treatment, including oncology. For example, it is recommended that the use of new-generation medicines by patients aged over 65 who suffer from colorectal cancer should be limited (p. 52). Doctors in hospitals also often refuse, or are unwilling, to perform stenting, ballooning and coronary artery bypass grafting. Furthermore, they are reluctant to perform oncological surgery on ageing patients, even if there are no cardiac contraindications. Another example of limits placed on medical services available to the elderly is that, even though doctors should carry out surgical treatment to fix a femoral

neck fracture within one day of its being broken, they use maintenance treatment even when there are no contraindications to surgery. As J. Twardowska-Rajewska says, doctors also sometimes refuse to apply intramedullary fixation or to perform arthroplasty, and they directly suggest that a patient should get a prosthesis from a private medical facility (walkers, crutches, dentures, and hearing aids). It is also difficult for ageing people to gain access to physical therapy and rehabilitation (p. 52).

Geriatricians' stance on this issue is that it is an undeniable fact that the Polish health care system discriminates against people on the grounds of age. They unanimously state that this phenomenon is caused by the insufficient number of geriatricians in Poland (there is not a single geriatrician in four provinces, and the rate of geriatricians per 10,000 inhabitants is less than 1, i.e. usually from 0.3 to 0.8 per 10,000 inhabitants, with the exception of one province). This is why there are so few geriatric outpatient clinics and, consequently, it is difficult to assess an elderly patient's health (Rajska-Neuman 2005). Furthermore, primary care physicians are insufficiently educated in geriatrics. There are also no prevention programs for elderly people (p. 54). Another factor contributing to the difficulties in providing geriatric care – which has been repeatedly pointed out by geriatricians – is that the National Health Fund does not stipulate the time of a doctor's visit in geriatrics in medical contracts. According to health care standards adopted for this medical specialty, the first visit should last 60 minutes and a follow-up doctor's visit should be 30 minutes long. These standards, however, do not translate into reimbursements from the National Health Fund, and the higher costs of treating senior patients are not taken into account as far as hospital care is concerned (p. 55). The stipulation that a 1.5 conversion factor should be used for this group of patients with regard to hospital care services remains ignored. It turns out that the methodology of providing health care services does not take into account ageing patients with multiple morbidities, and the National Health Fund's rules pertaining to contracts do not provide for the multiple treatments that are typical of geriatrics. Also, cancer diagnostics has not been included in the range of geriatric treatment services (p. 56). The cited text also points out that geriatric units are closing down and the number of beds in the existing units reduced, even as the number of patients is growing – which reduces treatment time. What is of utmost importance is the issue of palliative care for patients whose causal treatment has been completed and who can only undergo symptomatic treatment (p. 57). According to a consultant geriatrician, there are only 684 beds in geriatric units in Poland, and the number should be 7,000. Indirect forms of providing geriatric care are, obviously, another example of the lack of imagination on the part of the National Health Fund's decision-makers and show that the access barriers to health care (lack of medical care provided by doctors and nurses) are a textbook case of limits on ailing people's right to treatment. The stance presented by the College of Physicians Specializing in Geriatrics (*Kolegium Lekarzy Specjalistów Geriatrii*), which is based on reliable diagnosis, is yet

to be considered. The above-mentioned data, which confirm the fact that both formal and informal limitations are imposed on elderly patients, show that it is easy to document or even explain the phenomenon of limits on the possibilities for ageing people with regard to the role of the patient.

Limits on the space for the elderly as beneficiaries of social assistance programs is another example of the widespread phenomena of restrictions on ageing people's rights. This is emphasized by Barbara Szatur-Jaworska (2005), who lists several noticeable examples of age discrimination in this sphere of life, including the fact that the needs of the elderly are marginalized by local governments, which is why the funds for this purpose are severely limited and care services are underfunded. The low-income threshold causes the number of social assistance clients to steadily decline, even though the number of ageing people is growing. The elimination of benefits for unemployed spouses who are incapable of working has worsened the financial situation of the elderly. The income threshold is established without taking the prices of medicines into consideration. The elderly also have limited access to social reintegration programs, which are intended for people of working age and not for people of retirement age. Limited access for ageing persons to social welfare centres also results from the location of these institutions and a reluctance to fill out complicated forms and to be carefully examined by social workers. Generally speaking, elderly people are clearly discriminated against in their role as social assistance beneficiaries.

When analyzing the phenomenon of limiting public space, which is important from the perspective of the idea of social integration, it is worth paying attention to the main barriers to participation in society. The authors of the report entitled „*Stop dyskryminacji ze względu na wiek*” (*Stop Age Discrimination*), which has been cited here many times, point out several basic barriers that are manifested as: 1) difficulties concerning ageing people's participation in elections; 2) a lack of understanding on the part of local authorities for the need to support elderly people's activity; 3) a lack of mechanisms for consulting the elderly community on local governments' decisions; 4) a lack of an appropriate channel for providing information about local matters to older people; 5) limited access to the internet (p. 59). The authors do not treat these barriers as discrimination, but as an obstacle. However, regardless of how one defines this phenomenon, such barriers are undoubtedly a manifestation of limiting the public space for the elderly, especially with regard to the roles of the voter, consultant and architect of a given community.

In the course of analyzing limitations concerning public space one can also point to examples which have been empirically confirmed. As surveys conducted by the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland (Łuczak 2005) show, people at retirement age do experience and notice discrimination. Such discrimination manifests itself, for example, as unequal treatment (which has been reported by 58% of respondents), disregard and indifference (83%), unpleasant jokes (60%), financial exploitation (27%),

threats and intimidation (23%) and physical violence (13%). Almost one in four people has been treated inappropriately. Among the spheres of life in which they experienced less favourable treatment on grounds of age, the respondents mentioned public transport (51%), health care centres (45%), offices (44%), the street (35%), family (20%), and stores (19%) (p. 94). They also reported difficulties in accessing health care services – 40% were denied the possibility of undergoing a medical examination, 38% were met with disregard, 8% were denied medical assistance, and 5% were diagnosed as “ageing” when they asked for the causes of their ailments (p. 95).

The results of the survey on ageism and age discrimination show that seniors in Poland feel that they are treated as inferior citizens both in private and social life. As for the immediate social environment, this is manifested as disregard, indifference, unpleasant jokes, financial exploitation, threats and intimidation, or even physical violence. However, in the sphere of public life, ageing people mostly experience discrimination on public transport, in health care centers, in offices, on the street, in stores and in the workplace (Stypińska 2010). Among the sources documenting discriminatory practices against seniors it is worth mentioning the results of a study on job advertisements which was carried out by the Polish Society of Anti-Discrimination Law. It turned out that age was the second most common factor after sex, based on which employers used discriminatory practices as early as at the recruitment level (Stypińska, 2010). Research carried out among activists from seniors’ organizations aged 50 years and older in eight Polish cities indicate that half of the respondents believe that seniors feel discriminated against in Poland, both in private and social life, which is mainly manifested in a lack of respect. These studies clearly show that the respondents themselves have experienced many different forms of unequal treatment in their environment and, therefore, their opinions are not based on stereotypes but on facts (Stypińska 2010). The results of other studies concerning this phenomenon, i.e. those conducted by Sylwia Kropińska and Katarzyna Wiczorkowska-Tobis (2010), show that as many as 47% of respondents were treated dismissively by a doctor and experienced inappropriate treatment in the hospital, and 17% were discriminated against because of their age.

It is not only procedures for medical services but also doctors themselves that limit the possibilities for the elderly to decide about their own health and treatment methods – very often doctors make it easier for immediate family members to decide to drop the burden of responsibility for sustaining the life of a terminally ill patient. In their article, which deals with this issue, Michał Nowakowski and Luiza Nowakowska (2010) point out that the medicalization of old age and the fact that the management of the “problem” of old age is regarded as the key role of medicine, which has a strong influence on how old age is perceived by society, reduce the experience of ageing to personal contact with a doctor and determine elderly people’s system of beliefs, which is also reinforced by family and friends. According to the above-mentioned authors,

the biomedicalization of ageing often causes people to put the blame for social and demographic consequences of population ageing on the elderly.

As can be seen from sociological, educational, socio-medical and economic research, the phenomenon of limits on public space is an unpleasant experience for the elderly. There is much evidence that access for elderly people to social services has been officially restricted for several years. Access to medical and rehabilitation services is also statutorily and customarily limited. The area of medical services for ageing people is a particularly notable example of a stereotypical attitude toward the elderly on the part of doctors as well as of the influence of medicalization as understood in economic terms. However, limiting seniors' right to respect and dignity is the most distressing manifestation of such limitations. This is because they have been brought up to believe in such values. Therefore, it must be difficult for them to understand and accept the fact that they are made to occupy an inferior position in society.

The modest scope of this paper made it impossible to present a more in-depth discussion of the analyzed issue, together with its causes, manifestations and consequences. While the causes of limiting such space are already relatively well understood, the consequences of this phenomenon require further, more in-depth research.

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## **The third age in Poland. Pleasure and a new form of sociality**

### **Streszczenie**

Trzeci wiek to pole kulturowe, na które składają się praktyki kultury czasu wolnego emerytów. Wykształcił się w krajach zachodnich w latach 80. XX wieku. Celem artykułu jest analiza trzeciego wieku w Polsce: jakimi drogami zjawisko upowszechnia się w Polsce; z jakimi praktykami współwystępuje; w jakim stopniu stanowi powielenie wzorca zachodniego, a na ile ma odrębną specyfikę? Badano praktyki życia codziennego w późnej dorosłości w pięciu miejscowościach oraz dyskurs na temat starości w dwu sezonach popularnego polskiego serialu. Wśród badanych emerytów dominują praktyki użyteczności i unikania bezczynności charakterystyczne dla starości "przy rodzinie" bądź osamotnienie wynikające z izolacji od więzi rodzinnej. Trzeci wiek upowszechnia się w ramach oferty aktywizacyjnej pierwszego i trzeciego sektora. Do podjęcia praktyk trzeciego wieku motywuje osoby starsze ucieczka przed samotnością. Wewnętrzny mechanizm, będący motorem tych praktyk jest taki sam jak na Zachodzie, jest nim poszukiwanie przyjemności. Wzorców zachowań dostarczają media. Wykształca się nowoczesny hedonizm polegający na poszukiwaniu przyjemności w każdym doświadczeniu, charakterystyczny dla zachodnich społeczeństw konsumpcyjnych. Słabo rozwinięty jest aspekt konsumpcji czasu wolnego za pomocą usług rynkowych ze względu na mniejszą zamożność polskich emerytów.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

starość, późna dorosłość, trzeci wiek, czas wolny, konsumpcja, nowoczesny hedonizm

### **Abstract**

The third age is a cultural field realised through pensioners' leisure practices. It emerged in Western countries in the 1980s. This article is concerned with the third age in Poland and enquires into how the third age is spreading in Poland, what practices it is accompanied by, and to what extent it copies the Western pattern or how specific it is to Poland. The article analyses daily practices of later life in five locations and the discourse on old age in a popular Polish TV series. The pensioners in question are either engaged in practices of usefulness and avoidance of idleness characteristic of older people living with their family, or experience loneliness resulting from weaker family bonds. The third age is becoming more widespread due to activity opportunities provided by the public and non-profit sectors. Older people take up third age practices to escape loneliness. Pleasure-seeking, the internal mechanism propelling third age practices, is the same as in the West. What is emerging is a modern hedonism, encouraged by the media, consisting of seeking pleasure in every experience characteristic of Western consumer societies. Consumption of market leisure services is less developed in the Polish third age due to the lesser affluence of Polish pensioners.

### **Key words:**

old age, later life, third age, leisure, consumption, modern hedonism

A new model of later life, the so-called third age, emerged in the US and Western Europe in the 1980s. Due to the longer life span after retirement, physically and mentally able pensioners felt the need to maintain productivity and lead meaningful lives. Peter Laslett (1989) proposed that the third age which follows the first age (childhood and youth) and the second age (adulthood) should be differentiated from the fourth – old age. The third age would be the crown of life, a period of self-fulfilment and social activism, free from the obligations of the second age, secure thanks to pensions.

These postulates of new citizenship have not been fulfilled. The third age in the lives of American and European pensioners tends to be centred on enjoying leisure time rather than social activism. Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs (2005) use Pierre Bourdieu's theory in defining it as a cultural field consisting of leisure practices, i.e. seeking pleasure in consuming market services. The third age emerged and became popular among the baby boomer generation, which had relatively high pensions and a better education than previous generations. During their youth the cultural revolution of the 1960s took place, as a result of which the well-being and pleasure of an individual became socially respected values.

The authors believe that with the popularisation of the practices and values of the Western world, the range of the third age as a cultural field has expanded. One could even say that the third age has a global range at present. However, as argued by anthropologists, local cultures usually subject Western values and practices to modifications, adapting them to the way of life known to them. This process is called glocalisation. This article is devoted to the development of the third age in Poland as an example of glocalisation. Poland is an interesting case as it highly values a tradition of living with the family in old age. My research questions are as follows: how, if at all, is the cultural field of the third age spreading in Poland? To what extent does it copy the Western pattern or how specific it is to Poland and with what practices does it coexist? Gilleard and Higgs differentiate discourse and practices constituting the cultural field of the third age. I have analysed the practices of old people in five locations and the discourse about old age in a popular TV series watched by pensioners.

## **1. Old age and the third age: later life in modernity**

Old age started being considered a separate phase of life at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Hareven 1982). The fall in mortality resulted in increased social visibility of older people and the emergence of gerontological literature. It is then that old age began to be associated with weakness, dependence and illness – connotations still valid today. When only a few made it to old age, they were the strongest individuals in their communities (survival of the fittest). When reaching old age became more common thanks to the improvement of life conditions and the progress of medicine, people

who reached old age were weaker and more dependent. In industrial societies, older workers found it difficult to stay on the job market. In order to secure their needs, universal retirement was postulated. Its establishment in Western Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century confirmed the existence of a social category of old people, namely pensioners.

Tamara Hareven argues that the institution of a pension has loosened instrumental relations in the family, i.e. relations based on work carried out jointly by family members. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, intergenerational exchange relationships gradually dwindled. At the same time a segregation of age groups in society occurred. These factors have caused old people to become isolated in Western societies.

In the 1970s, UK magazines for pensioners started promoting modern appearance and an extended leisure lifestyle (Featherstone and Hepworth 1993). In the 1980s, a change in the practices of pensioners appeared – the third age was born (Gilleard and Higgs 2005). The first reason for this was increased affluence among pensioners. Until the 1970s, UK pensioners were homogenous in their poverty. The 1980s saw the retirement of people who kept their savings in occupational and personal pension funds. Pensioners became a more affluent and financially diverse category. Another reason for the birth of the third age was a loosening of the family and neighbourly bonds associated with geographical and social mobility, the presence of household appliances and the popularisation of mass media. The third reason lies in the change of habitus – the new generation of pensioners consisted of baby boomers who rebelled against the status quo in their youth. They contributed such new values to social life as youth, beauty, pleasure, authenticity, partnership and novelty. It was the developing market which was the motor of the cultural revolution happening in the baby boomers' youth. Western societies added the new category of young people to consumers and created new habits of frequenting the cinema and cafés, purchasing gadgets associated with pop culture icons, and participating in sport, tourism and anti-ageing practices. Having retired, this generation continued the practices carried out throughout earlier life, and so the third age emerged. The basic social role of a pensioner became that of a consumer.

## **2. Later family life in Poland**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on Polish lands the dominant family model was multigenerational, characterised by the cohabitation of three generations in one household: old parents and son with wife and children. The family was a production unit; the division of labour determined by sex, age and the position within the family (Szynkiewicz 1976). In these harsh conditions, participation in consumption depended on work carried out. The habit of work was instilled from early childhood. Old people did menial jobs and were responsible for childcare. Usefulness and idleness avoidance

were the primary principles of their existence (Lehr 2007). Inactivity was associated with impending death.

The national pension scheme was introduced in Poland in 1933. The pensions, which were low, did not extend to farmers until 1977, so instrumental relations in families continued to thrive. At the end of the 1960s, 67 percent of old people were living with their children. In the countryside, they formed permanent institutions in the form of multigenerational families; in the cities a more common option was temporary cohabitation resulting from the need to take care of elders or help working children. In the People's Republic of Poland old age without family was characterised by loneliness and poverty due to low pensions. At the end of the 1960s this situation concerned about 20 percent of old people (Piotrowski 1973).

After the political transformation, pensioners were no longer poor compared to the rest of the society due to their stable monthly income. The level of consumption among pensioners rose (Szatur-Jaworska et al. 2006). 44 percent of them provided financial support to their children. Cohabitation with children became less common, with 41 percent cohabiting in 1999. The percentage of pensioners living alone was on the rise (Czekanowski 2002).

### **3. The method**

In order to find out about the practices of pensioners living in various locations and regions, I have analysed the results of two qualitative studies. One is an instance of ethnographic fieldwork on everyday life carried out in Warsaw between 2005 and 2007, centred on seven women and four men selected on a contrastive basis so that they represented a variety of approaches to old age (Zalewska 2009). The other is research carried out by employees of the Institute of Public Affairs on the support available for seniors in local communities, as conducted by Mariola Raław in four rural and municipal localities in the Podlaskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie regions in 2010. I have analysed 16 interviews with men and women in earlier and later old age; four from each locality (Raław 2011).

In order to capture the change in the discourse on later life I have analysed seasons one and eleven (2000/01 and 2010/11) of the TV series *M jak miłość* (*L for Love*), broadcast on Polish public TV since 2000. This is the most popular TV series among Polish pensioners, which makes it an example of discourse directed at elderly people. It tells the story of a family and the intimate relationships of its members, with an elderly couple being at the head of the family (Zalewska 2013).

### **4. Third age in Poland. Leisure and pleasure**

Instrumental relations occurred in the families of some of the interlocutors. Almost all the remaining interlocutors would be keen on living close to their families if

given a choice. This did not necessarily mean cohabiting, but rather everyday contact and cooperation. Mr and Mrs Kowalski<sup>1</sup>, who were visited by their daughters once a month, complained about the infrequency of visits and lack of help with household chores (woman 75+, man 75+, Warsaw). A retired teacher told me about the routine of life with her husband, wishing that their children and grandchildren could live nearby, as that would change things (woman 75+, town in Podlasie). Longing, emptiness and loneliness appear when instrumental family relationships no longer function, but elders would still like to live according to the old model (Zalewska 2010). Isolation from the family bond appears.

A sense of longing was encouraged by the discourse accessible to pensioners. The model of the multigenerational family was promoted in *L for love*, where older protagonists lived with their son, his wife and children on a farm in the countryside. A change occurred in the course of the eleventh season (episode 764). As a result of the son's infidelity, his wife moved out to Warsaw with their children. Older characters were very worried about this situation until the female character Barbara stated that the world does not end with children – they brought them up as best they could, but now it was time for them to live their own lives. She invited her husband to a picnic by the river. This is the series' third age manifesto. The picnic did not happen in the end, as the elderly couple were prevented from leaving the house by their children's arriving unexpectedly with problems. It should be noted, however, that the third age comes in as a substitute, filling the void left by the family concerned with their own matters. A similar situation concerns another character from season eleven – Renia. This woman aged 50+ was complaining that her children were not visiting or calling (episode 763). A friend advised that this was normal and that she should get on with her own life. Renia followed the friend's advice, entered an intimate relationship, and moved in with her partner.

As far as the interlocutors were concerned, the motivation to enter third age came from their children leaving the family home, or from weakened contact with them. Due to a difficult financial situation and loneliness, Agnieszka visited the Day Care Centre in Warsaw daily. The centre provided free meals, excursions and the opportunity to spend time with other senior citizens. Her elder son died and she visited the younger one, who was mentally disabled and in care, every week. Her life was in the day care centre – it was there that she felt liked and respected and became part of the governing committee. Her female friends admired her feminine style and sought advice on various matters. She also had a “boyfriend” there. The centre used young people's slang and time was spent gossiping, dancing, enjoying excursions and engaging in social activities. Those frequenting the centre watched various TV series, e.g. the American *The Bold and*

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to interlocutors participating in ethnographic fieldwork I use changed names or surnames to emphasise the closeness connected with participant observation. When referring to the interlocutors featured in the research carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs I quote their sex, age and location, according to the standards used in such studies.

*the Beautiful* and it seems that they modelled their social relationships on that of the TV protagonists. What mattered was attractive appearance, popularity and intimate satisfaction. The dimension of pleasure derived from participating in leisure culture is present in the practices of the Polish third age. However, the dimension of satisfying consumer aspirations through market goods and services is reduced – Agnieszka bought cheap clothes at the local market place and the excursions for senior citizens were subsidised.

It is difficult to estimate the extent of participation in leisure culture. In the studied localities in the Podlaskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie provinces, the majority of older people stayed at home, performing practices of usefulness and idleness avoidance or longing for it, experiencing emptiness and watching TV. The norm existing in the rural community stated that an elderly woman should mind the house. The restricted opportunity for activities in the studied localities also constituted a limitation (Raław 2011). Leisure culture practices were observed in public and non-profit organisations acting for the benefit of old people, such as senior clubs, vocal clubs, third age universities and parish community activities. Such practices were also present in social events for senior citizens, excursions and pilgrimages organised by local authorities, social welfare centres and the church. Apart from that they took the form of informal coffee and cake meetings and nameday parties. Senior citizens who lived alone and whose time was not excessively occupied by family and local community affairs filled their lives with leisure practices to a large extent.

## **5. A new form of sociality?**

It is the sense of commitment inscribed in the bond between the individual and the community (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004) that makes one participate in the practices of usefulness and idleness avoidance. A different mechanism must be responsible for engaging in leisure practices, as it is not motivated by the common good of a group, nor is there a duty to participate. One could think that through leisure practices elderly people are subject to socialisation in a new type of sociality characteristic of consumer societies.

The emergence of a new type of sociality may be interpreted by referring to Colin Campbell's concept of modern hedonism (1987). This type of hedonism evolved within the bourgeoisie of Western Europe as part of the leisure and consumer revolutions of the 18th century, which accompanied the industrial revolution. The revolutions were spurred by the popularisation of leisure culture and availability of increasingly mass produced goods. Modern hedonism followed from the condemnation by ascetic protestant morality of traditional pleasures understood as separate events bringing the sensual gratification keenly pursued by the aristocracy. The modern bourgeoisie developed an ability to find pleasure in every experience. They acquired the ability to substitute

an illusion for the actual stimulus and to create pleasurable environments in their own minds. Modern hedonism laid the foundations for the experience of consumer desire, i.e. seeking gratification in acquiring and consuming everyday life objects. Modern hedonism extended onto further layers of Western societies in the 20th century in the time of mass consumption. The explosion of consumerism, which affected the generation of baby boomers in the period of their youth, can be understood as the development of modern hedonism on a mass scale.

## **6. Conclusion**

Old and new practices coexist among Polish pensioners. The most dominant are practices of usefulness and idleness avoidance or loneliness as a result of isolation from the family bond. The third age is starting to become more popular in Poland thanks to a modest range of activities available to seniors as part of the public and non-profit sectors. In this sense it is different from the third age in the West, which is mainly realised as part of the commercial sector. Polish pensioners do not tend to fulfil their needs on the free market, due to their lesser affluence. The internal mechanism which is the motor of these practices is the same both in Poland and in the West – it is the pursuit of pleasure, which points to globalisation rather than glocalisation.

If modern hedonism is responsible for the dimension of pleasure in the practices of the third age, this would mean that consumption and the free market play a greater role as factors of later life changes than previously assumed. Tamara Hareven believed the state to be the main factor of later life changes, whereas Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs believed it to be consumption and its changes in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modern hedonism came into being earlier, and after World War II, when Western European countries reached a level of mass consumption, it became a mass experience. The Polish example shows that for modern hedonism to emerge, consumer aspirations alone are sufficient – fulfilment is not essential. The models of behaviour are disseminated by the media. The development of the third age in Poland is most likely part of a wider phenomenon of social change, in which older mechanisms of sociality are replaced with new ones, characteristic of Western consumer societies.

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## **The lifestyle of senior citizens, or what affects their change**

### **Streszczenie**

Badanie dotyczyło polskich seniorów uczestniczących w objazdowych podróżach zagranicznych. Wyniki badań pokazały, że najczęstszymi powodami zmiany stylu życia okazały się: przejście na emeryturę, śmierć współmałżonka, choroby przewlekłe, nowy partner życiowy. Nowe style życia wiązały się z próbą dostosowania do świata ponowoczesnego, obrony przed dyskryminacją i ageismem.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

starzenie się, seniorzy, style życia

### **Abstract**

The study concerned Polish seniors involved in going on tours abroad. The results showed that the most common causes of lifestyle changes were retirement, the death of a spouse, chronic illness, or a new life partner. New ways of life were associated with an attempt to adapt to the postmodern world, protection against discrimination, and ageism.

### **Key words:**

aging, senior citizens, lifestyles

It could be said that old age is, to some extent, a convention. Today, this stage in human life begins at the age of 60, but more and more often it is said that it is actually 65. In a few years, it will probably be 70.

In various academic disciplines there are at least several definitions of the phrase “old age”. For a biologist, old age primarily means the weakening of the body and the reduction of its resilience, capacity and efficiency that comes with age. For economists, people are old when they need the help of others because of their condition. Sociologists associate old age with the retreat of people of certain age to the margins of society. Psychology points to the reduction of possibilities which senior citizens experience. They are worse at assimilating new information and struggle to accept changes. Gerontologists call the period between the age of 60 and 75 “early old age”. The WHO definition sets it around 60, and there are criteria indicating the age of 65.

According to the CBOS survey of the 2012, youth lasts until the age of 37 (the mean age of 36.97). From this moment onward, the age of maturity begins, and it continues until the age of 63 (precisely 63 years and 3 months). After this age, according to the respondents, old age begins (in 2007 it was 61 years and 3 months). In the 65–69 age group, more than half of the respondents think of themselves as old people. Nearly three

quarters of Poles (72%) think about their old age (CBOS 2012); women being more likely to do so than men. Poles set the threshold of old age quite early; in the Nordic countries the indicated age is 80 – only then does old age begin. Periods of old age vary as well. All old people cannot be regarded in the same way.

In my research, conducted between 2009 and 2012, I wanted to look at the lifestyles of retired people, at whether those lifestyles change, and at what affects those changes. I was also interested in whether those people see themselves as old, and what old age was. Because the subject of activity of the elderly – mainly in the area of participation in the UTA and senior clubs – often appears in literature, I was interested in whether senior citizens were active in other areas of life, such as travel and foreign tourism.

I took more than 20 trips abroad and my study involved nearly 100 people (the majority were women; mostly widows or divorcees). Respondents identified with old people as a group, although they themselves did not feel old. They were elderly due to their age and the youth culture in which they had to live. They also felt old because of their attachment to tradition, their hierarchy of values, or because of their lifestyle (to some extent inherited from their parents.) *Yes, I am elderly, I am 66 years old. All around they talk about young people; only young people can be seen on television, in newspapers, everywhere. No wrinkles, no unnecessary folds of fat. Young people run through the streets, talk loudly in buses.* Another respondent said: *In my day it was different. Women behaved modestly. Old people were respected. Today, only mobile phones and the internet rule.* Yet another: *My granddaughter urged me to buy a computer and start using the internet. I came around when she went abroad. Now every day we talk on Skype. I had to change to be more modern.*

From the respondents' point of view, old age meant physical or mental disability, dependence on others (children, caregivers), chronic illness, or "shutting oneself in one's home", staying only within the circle of family and media. *Old age is a kind of passive vegetation – eating, taking medication, watching something, sleeping. Occasionally someone, usually a mailman, pays a visit. And that's it.* Aging was associated with the old model of the elderly of their youth. *I remember my grandmother; it seemed to me that she was terribly old, although she was in her 60s then. She was stooped, always dressed in dark colors, her hair was gray, her face wrinkled. As long as she could walk, she took care of us and our home. She was always doing something. She went to church; it was important. I do not remember her going out anywhere else, or meeting anybody.* The interviewed women, no longer useful as caregivers to their grandchildren, yet still physically fit, decided to change their life.

Trying to reconstruct the ways of life of seniors, as the subjects of my study preferred to be called (*senior sounds a bit nicer; "elderly", "old" reminds me of something worn out, useless – no, I prefer to be a senior*), I adopted the concept of Andrzej Siciński.

He drew attention to the differences in lifestyles, to the free choice made by people, to their own and individual arrangements of cultural space that constitute lifestyles. Lifestyle, which is a characteristic way of existing, distinguishes one individual from another. These behaviors, however, vary in scope and form, and are aimed at specific purposes; nevertheless, the motivations of these actions are also important (Siciński 2002: 22–23). Types of needs and means of satisfying them determine lifestyles. Lifestyle makes it possible to locate an individual in the social context, and it is not only a matter of assigning them a social class, but also such categories as occupation, sex and age group. Choice regarding meeting their needs is determined to a large extent by economic situation, but it also may be accompanied, as Pierre Bourdieu would say, by the size of cultural, symbolic and social capital (Bourdieu 2006).

In their responses, the interviewed people clearly stressed situations and circumstances that have changed their current lifestyles.

Most often they indicated the fact of retirement. While it had previously been eagerly anticipated, in a sense, after a few months such life became boring and routine. The course and the organization of days, weeks and years changed. The social world of the surveyed people shrank; over time, they lost contact with friends from work. For some, the need to be useful – *I didn't feel old and useless yet, I had the strength and desire to do something* – was satisfied by taking care of grandchildren. Some took up jobs to fill their free time with activities: *now I work in a newsstand, I have contact with people, I have to take care of myself so as not to scare off the customers*. Others sought interesting cultural engagement in their immediate and broader environment, as determined by their financial situation and interests: *I enrolled my wife and myself in a dance class, and sometimes we go to the theater, when tickets for senior citizens are available. We also attended classes at the UTA*. The desire to change their lifestyle was declared, above all, by people who were open to change throughout their entire lives: *all our lives we were changing something; we were adjusting. We were never bored, even when we were alone. Together with our friends, we were always organizing something; some trips and meetings*.

Another reason for change was the death of a spouse. Suddenly, emptiness emerged. There was nobody to care for, no one to talk to or argue with anymore. *I missed Staś, his shuffling slippers, his whining, but also the fact that I had someone to hug; to complain to*. Some of the respondents began to actively participate in the life of their parish, and others, at their friends' urging, began embracing the world of modern technology. They began to find new friends in different networks targeted toward senior citizens and others, and continued their interests, acquiring additional knowledge from the internet – *now I have access to a variety of recipes, I watch blogs and pictures of dishes which are very appetizing* – or learning something new – *friends from the website taught me to use Skype and several computer programs. Now I know how to navigate the internet; what*

“to google something” means. I must admit that I myself learned a lot about taking pictures or places worth seeing from my friends at the [Senior.pl](#) website.

Yet another reason for life changes was chronic disease. It took a lot to reorganize and learn a new way of life. I had to refurnish the apartment; to adjust it to my disability. It was hard. But it was even harder for me to leave the house, do errands or go shopping. Maintaining fitness also required lifestyle adjustments: new diets, physical therapy, leaving the house and escaping the disease or disability – It was only after I started physical therapy, that I saw that others somehow had reconciled themselves with their disease. We became friends. They gave me lots of good advice. I’m happy; I now have new friends, I have someone I can talk to about my concerns.

The last category which appeared in responses of the interviewed, were other people. Here, lifestyle changes were influenced by either the closest family members (children, grandchildren) or friends or new partners. *You know, they talked us into this traveling. We save every penny for trips. They ran a blog, showed photos from their excursions, described some interesting country that they had visited.* Or another response – *Our children bought us our first trip as a gift for our wedding anniversary. We loved it. Now our life revolves around journeys. We get some additional work, save, browse the internet looking for good deals, and then we go on a trip.*

The situation of those subjects who entered into new relationships was particularly difficult. Those relationships were not fully accepted by their families: *They were angry that I forgot about their father. He’s been dead for 10 years. I want to be with someone every day, not just on holidays, when they have time to visit me.* Or another response: *It changed my life. I felt stronger, but I also started to take care of myself, because she also cares.*

In conclusion, we can say that the lifestyles and life patterns of retirees are changing, and that there is a departure from passivity to activity. Of course, the dominant model is still not that of an active senior citizen. Nevertheless, it is apparent that senior citizens try to come into their own in a different culture, sometimes foreign to them, in a post-modern world. They try to follow Giddens’ suggestions that the sooner we free ourselves from the rule of tradition, the more options we have to choose from (Giddens 2001). Timidly, they enter the world of modern technology, trying to satisfy their curiosity about the world and people. They do it cautiously, yet they do it. Senior citizens realize that their retirement period is given to them to meet their specific needs; for their self-realization or acceptance. Despite their retirement, they try to look for additional work not only to supplement their budgets, but also to be able to satisfy their own needs and the needs of their grandchildren or children. In addition to tangible benefits – i.e. financial resources – this form of professional activity gives people a sense of being useful, rejuvenates them, and transfers them to the productive, active segment of the population, although they are already of retirement age. For people who travel at

least 2–3 times a year, funds are essential. To supplement their income, single senior citizens rent rooms in their apartments, mostly for young people. They also begin to use financial tools to increase their revenues. Using the internet is almost a necessity for senior tourists. These technologies enable them to search for interesting excursions, exchange views on message boards, and buy travel and photography accessories, as well as clothes and shoes for everyday use, at bargain prices. Such activities are advantageous in terms of saving money (products are cheaper than in brick and mortar shops) and time (they do not need to leave home to go shopping). As indicated by the respondents, the internet is not only an instrument for entertainment, although it is also used for entertainment purposes: seniors belong to hobby groups (traveling, playing cards, cooking, photography, etc.), make new friends, read a variety of content, watch movies or listen to music. As the respondents declared, they want to continue to be attractive, healthy and fit. They also acquire medical knowledge from the internet more often, although they verify it during medical appointments. In the case of women, while the family did not express their negative views on exercise or diet changes, in relation to appearance (style of dress, changing hairstyle, including hair colour) and especially make-up, children were critical of their mothers – claiming that it was not proper, that they should their age. In this case, the adult children treated their mothers as children who behave inappropriately. Also, children often showed disapproval of their parents' new relationships. Besides addressing their need to be useful in the areas of family and work, a minority of surveyed senior citizens also work for the local community. They participate in parish life, work in housing communities, and in some cases also in various associations. A significant relationship can be observed. Immediately after retirement, the social world of the surveyed people narrowed mainly to their immediate family, and their everyday practices and rituals changed. However after some groundbreaking incident or discouragement, or boredom associated with an excess of free time, the subjects introduced changes into their lifestyles.

All of the above lifestyle changes were related to some costs; either emotional or financial. In many cases, new ways of life were a defense against discrimination on grounds of age – *I know I'm old, but that doesn't mean that I should stay at home and stop working or hanging out with friends* – or exclusion from many walks of life – *I don't leave home, but I am up to date. TV doesn't give me as much as the internet. I feel free, I can engage in discussion at forums where no one asks about age; I can drink coffee while talking with my friends on Skype. On the internet, I can buy shoes and clothes that I couldn't get in the real world.* Respondents are aware that living in a culture of young people, they cannot compete with them in terms of experience or knowledge, but the solution may be making adjustments in their preferred range – composing their lifestyle in a way that would give them satisfaction and enable them to meet their needs at this stage of life. However, the basic prerequisite here is health, a willingness to change, and acceptance.

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## Activities and lifestyles of elderly people

### Streszczenie

Ludzie starsi stanowią zróżnicowaną grupę społeczną pod względem cech kulturowych, statusu społecznego, problemów zdrowotnych, sytuacji ekonomicznej i społecznych, warunków mieszkaniowych i rodzinnych. Stąd także ich różne formy aktywności i style życia. Styl życia większości seniorów można określić jako bierny i monotony. W niewielkim stopniu uczestniczą oni w kulturze, zdecydowanie częściej oglądają TV czy słuchają radia niż idą do teatru czy kina. Głównym obszarem aktywności osób starszych są: rodzina, telewizja, Kościół. Pozostałe potencjalne sfery aktywności, jak: rozrywka, edukacja, turystyka czy kultura pozostają poza zasięgiem zainteresowań lub możliwości respondentów. Brak innych form aktywności może wynikać ze stanu zdrowia, właściwości charakteru, z wcześniejszego stylu życia, z wzorów kulturowych, lecz może być również wynikiem tych okoliczności, które ograniczają możliwości społecznego uczestnictwa starego człowieka, skłaniając go do pasywności (np. słaba kondycja ekonomiczna emerytów, czy brak wzorów aktywnej starości). W związku z czym brak jest seniorów w przestrzeni publicznej. Ich aktywność w przeważającej mierze odnosi się do przestrzeni prywatnej.

### Słowa kluczowe:

ludzie starzy, aktywność, styl życia

### Abstract

Elderly people constitute a social group that is heterogeneous in terms of cultural traits, social status, health issues, financial and social situation, living conditions, and familial ties. This leads to variety in the forms of activity they pursue and the lifestyles they lead. The lifestyle of most seniors can be described as passive and monotonous. They take part in cultural activities to a relatively small degree. They watch TV and listen to the radio much more frequently than they go to theaters or cinemas. The main areas of activity for the elderly are: family, television, and church. Other potential areas of activity, such as entertainment, education, tourism and culture - remain beyond the realm of interests and/or capabilities of respondents. This lack of other forms of activity may be the result of people's health status, character traits, earlier ways of life or cultural models, but it can also be the result of the circumstances that limit the elderly people's opportunities for social participation, leading them to passivity (e.g. the poor economic condition of retirees, or the lack of active elderly role models). Therefore, there is a lack of senior citizens in the public sphere, since their activity predominantly relates to the private sphere.

### Key words:

elderly people, activity, lifestyle

An elderly person's overall condition, level of activity, lifestyle, needs and expectations depend on a combination of biological, psychological and sociological factors. Elderly

people constitute a social group that is heterogeneous in terms of cultural traits, social status, health issues, financial and social situation, living conditions, and familial ties. This leads to variety in the forms of activity they pursue and the lifestyles they lead. As early as during the first half of the twentieth century, Helena Radlińska wrote that old age is modified by one's profession, as well as by education and self-development. "In jobs that require a higher level of education and self development, the onset of old age is delayed" (Radlińska 1947: 12). Anna Zawadzka contends that the earlier phases of a person's life determine the quality and type of his or her activity in later stages of life, creating the possibility of undertaking conscious self-training and self-education. Furthermore, the type of activities in which elderly people engage is influenced by psychosocial factors, such as their personality traits, or – in the case of Polish society – the acquiescence of the employed sector to recreational, autocreative, and leisure activities (Zawadzka 1995: 39–52).

In analyzing activity as an inherent tendency or capacity to act, which is at the root of all behaviour, a means of exploring reality, and understood as a mental property manifested in physical and intellectual undertakings and conditioned by personality factors (Zych 2001: 19), it is not hard to call upon specific theories of activity, exclusion, and continuation. The first of these, formulated by Robert J. Havighurst, asserts that a good old age can be achieved by continuing engagement in various activities, as far as one's health and fitness allows. The theory of exclusion, developed by Elaine Cumming and William Henry, claims that with old age, a person's activity becomes limited, his or her social bonds with others weaken, and so the person withdraws from social life, becoming increasingly self-concentrated. Finally, the theory of continuation, formulated by Warren Peterson, combines elements of the theories of activity and exclusion. It asserts that individual phases of life are extensions of previous phases. When a person goes through the various stages of life, he or she develops values, norms and practices that are rather constant and form part of his or her personality. The key concept is adaptation: it is assumed that an individual approaching old age retains his or her abilities, while adapting to ever-new situations (Atchley 1972).

The theory of activity is based on the concept of education regarding old age, as formulated by Aleksander Kamiński. It involves aiding people in acquiring interests and aspirations, as well as skills and habits that will be helpful in achieving extended youthfulness and a satisfying lifestyle upon reaching retirement age. Properly education people about old age is the best method to get them to accept it and even look forward to it as a period of life with its own intrinsic charms. The most important factors that prolong one's youth beyond one's sixties, according to A. Kamiński, include useful work and communal interests, accompanied by a monthly pension that does not fall below the poverty line. Other important factors are the state of one's health, diet, physical exercise, hygiene and ability to live with others, because these factors help one cope with the changing environment in which seniors will live (Kamiński 1978).

If activity is synonymous with life and consistent effort adapted to a person's capacity, then it is necessary for proper self-development, allows one to lead a creative and harmonious life, forms the basis for the treatment of many diseases, and slows the ageing process. Activity, regardless of age, provides a sense of satisfaction. However, lack of activity, personal contacts and support from other people creates a sense of inadequacy, which in turn leads to pain, isolation and loneliness. It can also cause loss of acceptance from one's environment, a worsening sense of well-being, and health deterioration. As a result, there is a strong relationship between health and level of activity. According to Bień (Bień 2007) lack of activity can lead to loneliness, social isolation, progressive disability and even premature mortality among the elderly.

Activities, according to Małgorzata Dzięgielewska, can be divided into three types:

- formal – regarding participation in social organizations, in politics, in the works for the local community, volunteering, etc.;
- informal – consisting of contact with family, friends, colleagues and neighbours;
- solitary – which includes watching TV, reading, and developing one's own interests and hobbies.

These activities are determined by such factors as education, family background, health status and level of physical fitness, living conditions, gender, place of residence, and the impact of cultural institutions (Dzięgielewska 2006: 161).

Grażyna Orzechowska categorizes elderly people's activities by field of interest:

- Home/family activities – which refers to running a household and participating in immediate family life;
- Cultural activities – which include reading, watching TV, listening to the radio and participating in cultural institutions and senior citizens' clubs;
- Professional activities – which fulfill the need for recognition, usefulness and suitability;
- Social activities – which involve participation in various organizations;
- Educational activities – which help older individuals in continuous self-improvement;
- Religious activities;
- Recreational activities – such as working on the field, relaxation, physical exercise and favourite activities done for pleasure (Orzechowska 1999: 28–29).

Factors that limit the activity of older people include biological, psychological and socio-economic ones. Among the biological factors the following are noteworthy: deterioration of health; difficulties in movement; the nervous system's being overloaded with different types of stimuli (e.g. noise, stress, monotony or information), which can cause fatigue; poor nutrition, including both vitamin deficiency and excess calories; prescription drug dependence; recreational drug use (Skórzyńska 1999: 131).

Among the psychological factors of aging, the following may also be causes of social isolation: the gradual passing away of relatives and friends; simultaneous loss of confidence and unwillingness to make new connections, leading to a gradual withdrawal from social activity.

Among the socio-economic factors, the most important are: widowhood; the loss of one's professional role due to retirement; low income, which limits participation in social life and various forms of recreation; lack of preparation for old age; a negative attitude towards one's environment. (Łopatyński 1992: 8).

I will now present research conducted in Mazovia.

## 1. Organization of free time

The following research indicates that the respondents are mainly homebound, and the vast majority of their activity is focused around the house. The most persistent habits they had learnt from earlier periods of their lives were watching television or listening to the radio, reading, and meeting with friends and acquaintances.

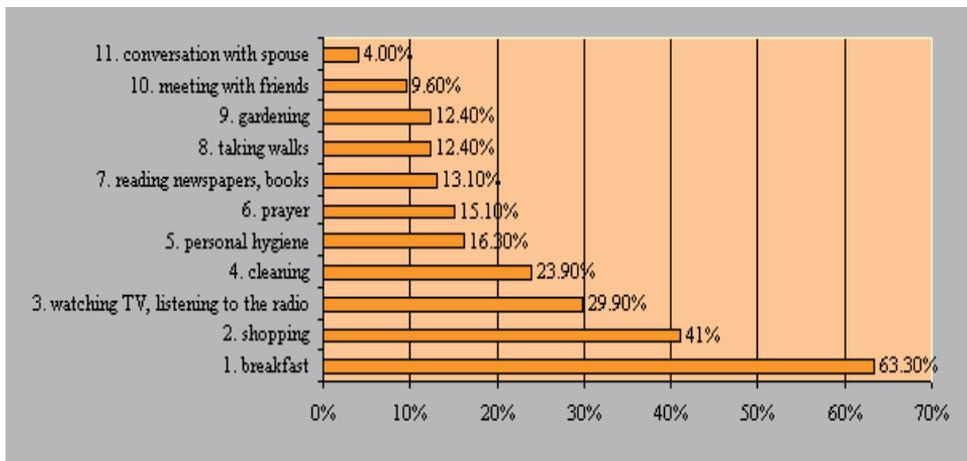


Fig. 1 Activities most commonly performed by respondents on a typical morning<sup>1</sup>

The research shows that the most common activities of older people on a normal day are meals; i.e. breakfast (63.3%), dinner (66.5%) and supper (26.3%). As can be seen, meals determine elderly people's daily rhythm. Besides eating, the most commonly performed activities in the morning are shopping (41%), watching TV and listening to the radio (29.9%), cleaning (23.9%), ablutions (16.3%), prayer (15.1%), reading newspapers and books (13.1%), taking walks (12.4%), and gardening (12.4%). At noon, respondents indicate that they also spend their time on relaxation (28.7%) and meeting with friends (13.5%). In the evening, the most common activities by far are watching TV and

<sup>1</sup>All data presented in the form of tables and figures in the article come from the author's own research.

listening to the radio (81.7%). In addition, respondents eat dinner (26.3%), pray (17.5%), read newspapers and books (17.5%) and talk with friends and family (17.15%).

The vast majority of respondents attend mass on Sunday morning (62.5%). Later, they meet with other family members (61.8%), while in the evening, most respondents spend time watching TV or listening to the radio (76.1%). Just as on weekdays, meals – breakfast (51.8%), dinner (51.8%), and supper (18.7%) – make up an important part of the day.

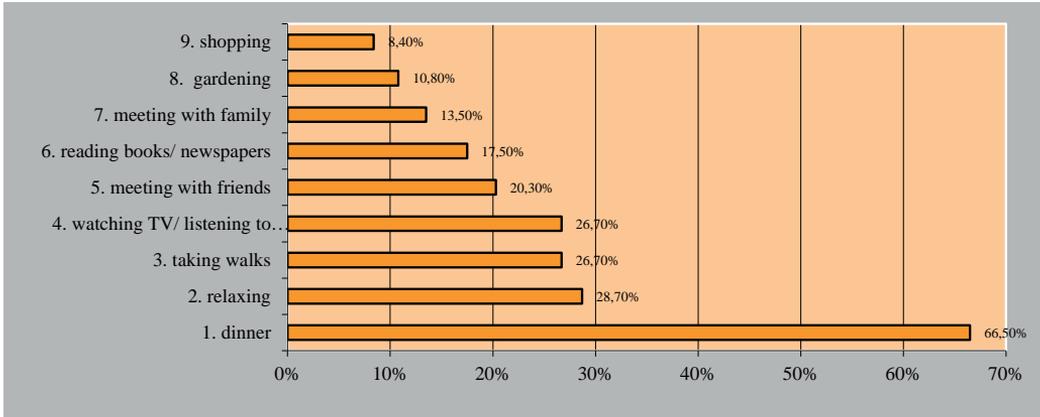


Fig. 2 Activities most commonly performed by respondents at noon

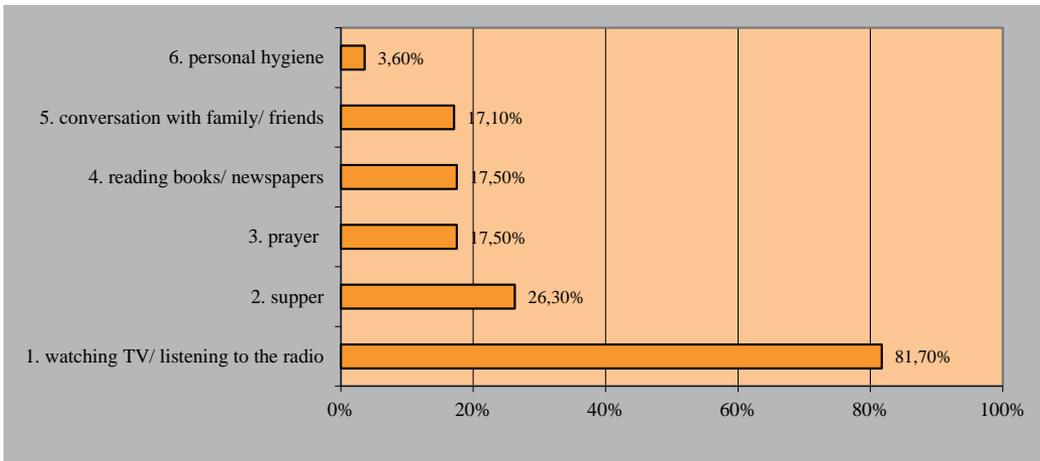


Fig. 3 Activities most commonly performed by respondents on a typical evening

The lifestyle of senior citizens, according to this research, can be described as passive and monotonous. Respondents are involved in culture to a very small degree. They prefer to watch TV or listen to the radio rather than going to the theater or cinema. The main areas of activity for the elderly are family, television, and church. Other potential spheres of activity, such as entertainment, education, tourism, or culture remain beyond the respondents' realm of interests and capabilities. This lack of other forms of

activity may be the result of one's health status, character traits, earlier way of life or cultural models, but it can also be the result of the circumstances that limit elderly people's opportunities for social participation, leading them to passivity (e.g. the poor economic standing of retirees, or a lack of active elderly role models).

For the beneficiaries of pensions and welfare, another major factor (in addition to those previously mentioned) that limits access to popular culture (e.g. movies, theaters, concert halls, museums, books and newspapers) is the cost, which is beyond the ever-shrinking budgets of today's senior citizens. The need for access to popular culture has always been pushed into the background of social needs and economic problems. Thus, institutions and establishments that foster cultural and educational activities, including so-called Universities of the Third Age, may help change the elderly's passive lifestyles.

## 2. Hobbies

When asked about their interests, passions, and hobbies, 33.5% of respondents did not indicate any interest or hobby. For 13.5%, it is gardening, for 12.4% it is reading books, 7.2% said handicrafts, 4.4% said cultural entertainment, and 3.2% said solving

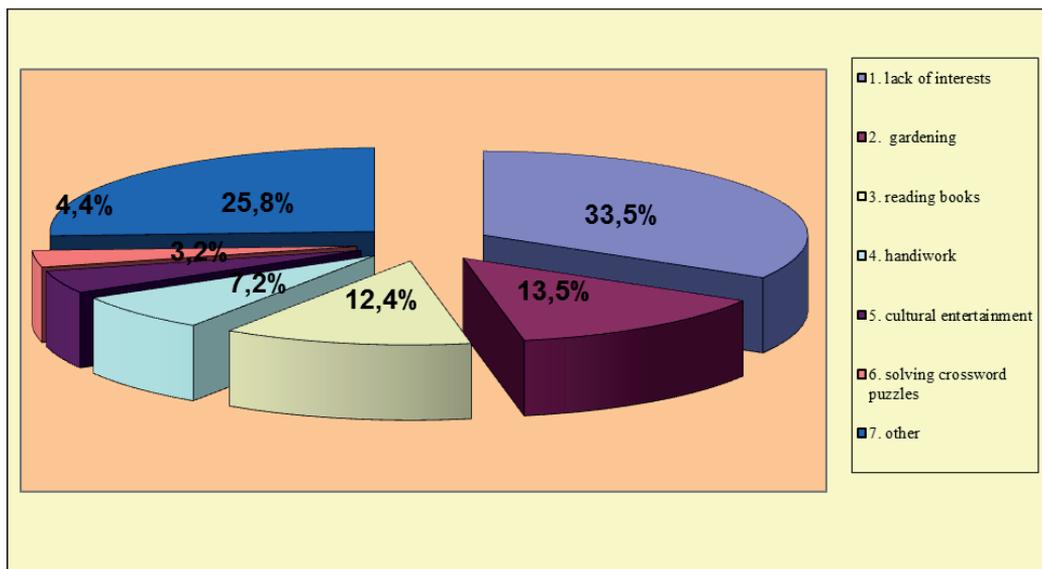


Fig. 4 Respondents' interests, passions, and hobbies

crosswords. When asked about their interests, respondents quoted the following: "I like to go to the forest – I pick whortleberries, wild mushrooms, and dewberries", "I like to sing – I sometimes sing in the parish", "I'm involved in parish life: I like helping those in need, and helping with the renovation of the church", "I have a dog – I take care of him and take him for walks. I also fish and cultivate my garden, because we have

a summer home”, “(I enjoy) music, singing and solving crosswords”, “(I enjoy) fishing and working in my greenhouse”, “(I enjoy) watching TV”, “I like working on clocks”, “I have a general interest in what is happening in the world; I watch the news, and read the newspaper”, “I play bridge and chess”, “I am interested in sports: football, handball, track and field”, “I make crafts from copper and amber”, “I read about recent Polish, Russian, and European history”, “I’m interested in my garden and the bees I care for.

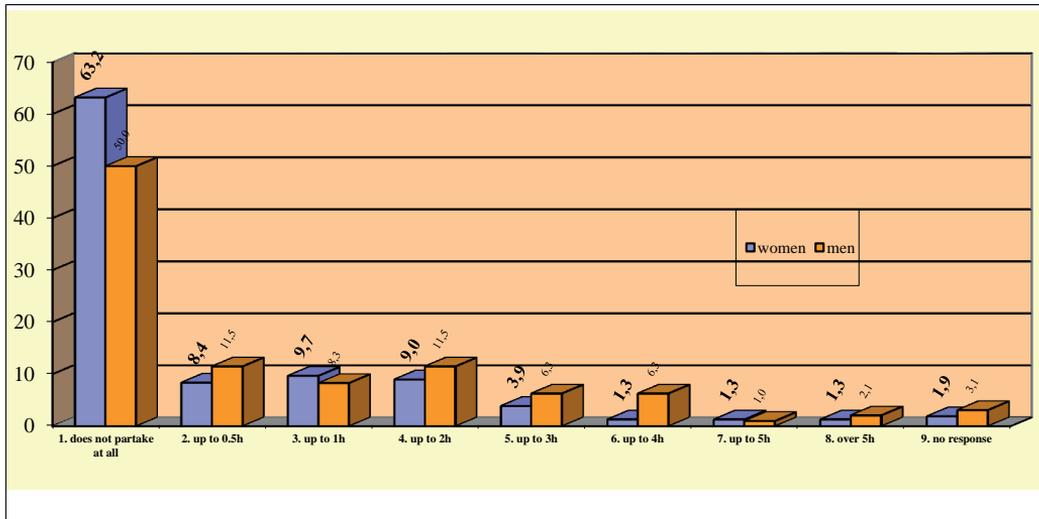


Fig. 5 Time spent on pursuing interests and hobbies by gender (in %)

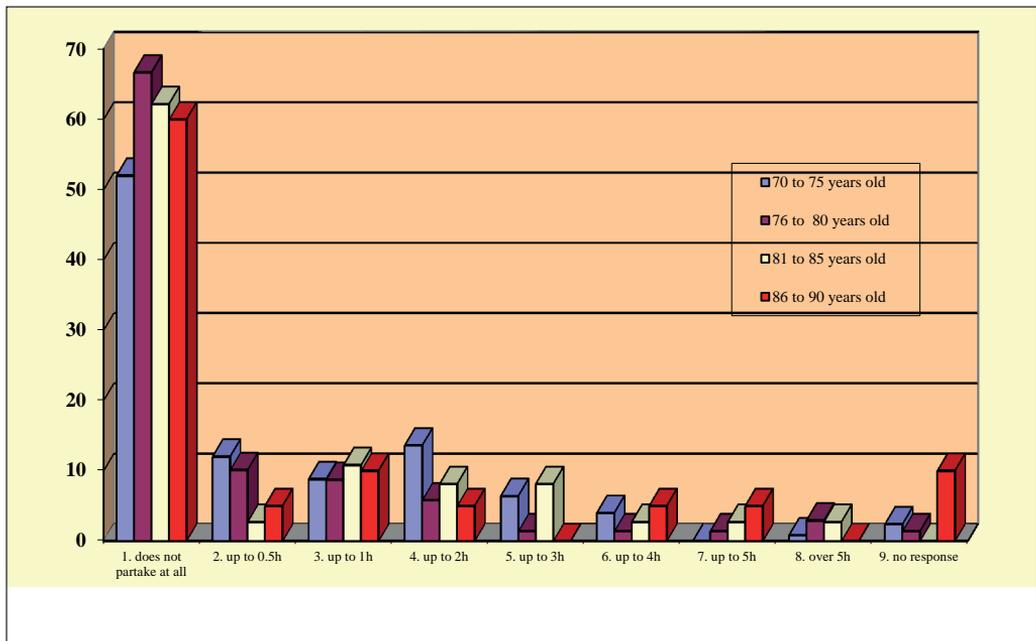


Fig. 6 Time spent on pursuing interests and hobbies, by age (in %)

I have an apiary, where I spend a lot of time”, “(I spend time on) home improvement and repairs”, “(I spend time on) improving my land: I’m making a pond, creating little paths, and planting”, “(I enjoy) reading books, especially murder mysteries”, “(I’ve been) stamp collecting for over 40 years”, “I like riding bikes”, “I specialize in breeding pigeons”, “I crochet”.

As can be observed, one of the signs of ageing is reduced activity, which in turn leads to malaise, loneliness, boredom, and a feeling of not being needed. Elderly person are often relatively inactive, which makes it less likely that their basic needs, particularly their social needs connected with living among other people, are met.

### 3. Involvement in various aspects of life

**Tab. 1 Membership in organizations, associations, etc.**

Type of organization	Membership in organizations, associations etc.					
	Yes		No		Overall	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Veterans' associations	22	8.8	229	91.2	251	100.0
Religious communities and movements	25	10.0	226	90.0	251	100.0
Labour unions	11	4.4	240	95.6	251	100.0
Rural housewives' associations	1	0.4	250	99.6	251	100.0
Political parties	6	2.4	245	97.6	251	100.0
Self-help organizations	5	2.0	246	98.0	251	100.0
Local governments	2	0.8	249	99.2	251	100.0
Community clubs	5	2.0	246	98.0	251	100.0
Senior citizens' associations	15	6.0	236	94.0	251	100.0

The majority of the respondents (over 90%) do not belong to any organization. Ten per cent are members of religious communities or movements, and 8.8% are members of veterans' associations. Eighteen of the respondents were members of the Association of the Living Rosary, eight belonged to the Polish Society of War Veterans, five to the Polish Association of Pensioners and Annuitants, the same number to the Polish Teachers' Union, four to the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy, three to the Catholic Action Association and the same number to parish choirs. Two people were members of the Society of Polish Army War Veterans. The same number of people belonged to the Warsaw Uprisers and the Volunteer Fire Brigade. Respondents also belonged to the Gray Ranks Paramilitary Association, the Polish Army Soldiers' Association, the Grójec Area „Głuszc” Society, the Katyń Family Association, the Work Association for Engineers and Technicians, a community council, and the Polish Accountants' Association.

**Tab. 2 Commitment of respondents to helping non-family members**

Commitment of respondents to helping non-family members						
	Yes		No		Overall	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Volunteering	18	7.2	233	92.8	251	100.0
Charity groups in parishes	28	11.2	223	88.8	251	100.0
Looking after graves	38	15.1	213	84.9	251	100.0
Looking after places of historical significance	20	8.0	231	92.0	251	100.0
Looking after children of acquaintances or neighbours	16	6.4	235	93.6	251	100.0
Helping neighbours	60	23.9	191	76.1	251	100.0
Helping the sick or disabled	37	14.7	214	85.3	251	100.0

When respondents extended their help beyond their family, they most often helped neighbours (23.9%), looked after graves (15.1%), helped the sick or disabled (14.7%) and looked after children of acquaintances or neighbours. Help towards neighbours or acquaintances mainly took the form of lending money (12.4%). 6.8% of respondents donated money to fundraisers for children in need and the same percentage supported charities. A small percentage of respondents did volunteer work, or took part in initiatives for the local community, sports, or cultural events<sup>2</sup>.

Elderly people have more time than younger people; they possess more knowledge and experience than the latter and could use those attributes to better help themselves and others. However, that is not what is happening. One could imagine that belonging to organizations and performing social or volunteer work would be an important and beneficial part of the elderly lifestyle. However, only a small percentage of the respondents pursue fulfillment in such a manner, even though volunteering and helping others offer possibilities for further growth, allow for the discovery of new interests, and present the means to continue educating oneself and expand one’s knowledge. Elderly people most often lean towards spiritual values. Religiosity is related to one’s own age and to death, and to the system of moral values a person uses to judge his or her life, as well as the lives of others.

The results of the studies carried out showed that 63.7% of the respondents were people of faith and practiced systematically, 26.3% were unsystematically practicing people of faith, 7.2% were people of faith but did not practice, 0.8% were not people of faith but adhered to religious traditions, and 2% defined themselves as not being people of faith.

As for participation in religious practices, 53.4% of the respondents declared that they participate once a week, 23.1% several times per week, 10.4% once to twice per month and 13.1% a few times per year. Participation in religious practices plays a significant role in the life of the elderly; especially women. Partaking in masses or other

<sup>2</sup> Their social engagement is two to three times lower than that of people in western European countries and is usually limited to close family. It is correlated with a low level of trust towards other people; a characteristic of Polish society. This lack of trust cements the passiveness of Polish senior citizens.

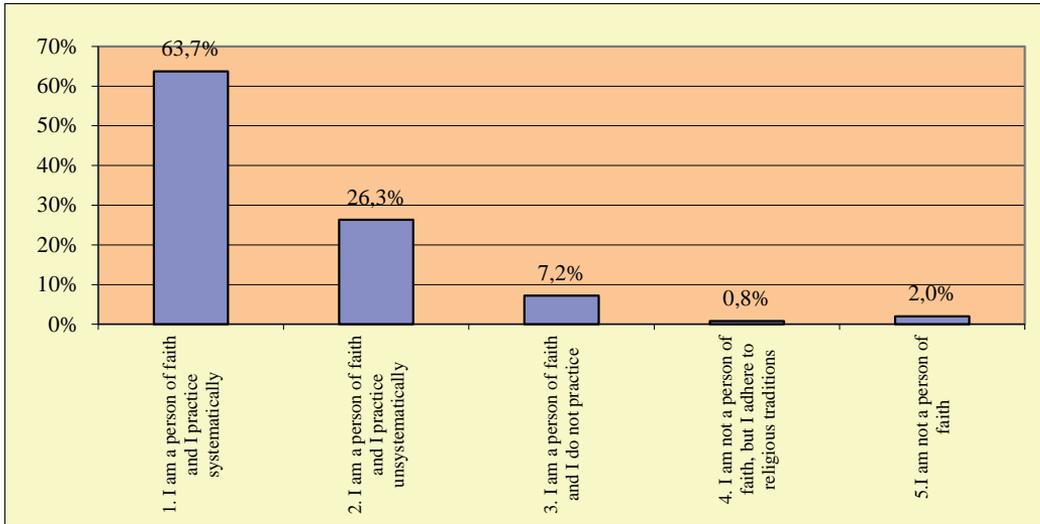


Fig. 7 Attitude towards religion

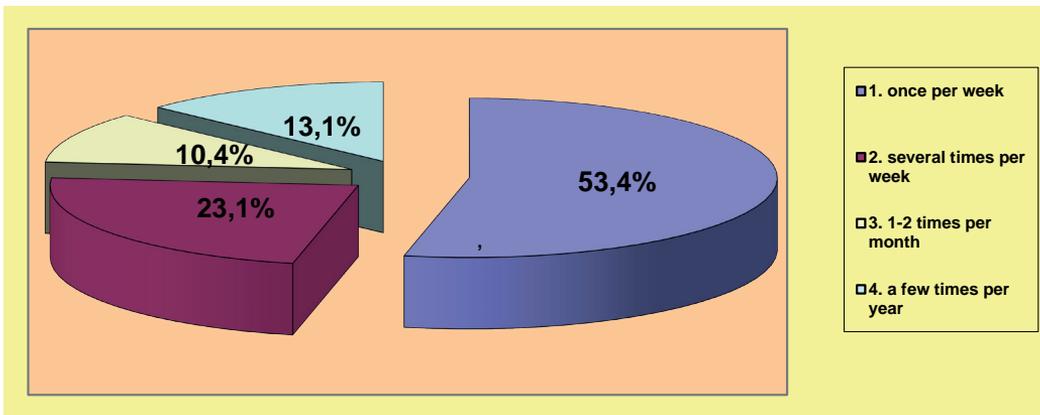


Fig. 8 Frequency of participation

such events and praying the rosary or other prayers take up a significant portion of their free time. Religious practices fulfill not only the spiritual needs of the elderly, but also provide a sense of safety and participation in a community. For some of the respondents, going to church is not only a time for meeting with God, but also with other people. Participation in a religious community gives them the feeling of belonging to a larger group of people that share similar spiritual needs and similar views on key issues.

In conclusion, it is plausible to say that the domain of elderly people is watching TV, listening to the radio, reading, gardening, practicing religion, and participating in family meetings. Few elderly people devote their free time to hobbies and physical activity, going to the theatre, the cinema, museums or restaurants, or participating in cultural events. Hence, it can be argued that the wider participation of elderly people in their

respective communities is inadequate. This applies to different aspects of this participation, namely being active in political or social structures, openness to the problems of other people and readiness to assist in such problems, as well as media appearances. In general, there is a lack of elderly people in the public sphere. Their activity is mostly limited to the private sphere. Those limitations exist due to the presence of formal barriers. What needs to change are social values – both of the elderly and of younger generations, especially of professions and associations that influence public opinion. In urban design, the needs and limitations of the elderly should be taken into greater consideration. In such initiatives it is important not only to consider “stairs and high ledges”, but primarily to construct more elderly-friendly architecture that considers the needs and limitations of older people (B. Szatur–Jaworska 2008: 121). The need to combat the passivity of senior citizens was strongly emphasized in the national plan of action in accordance with the European Year of Active Elderly and Intergenerational Solidarity in 2012. Said document delineates goals that are meant to encourage activity in elderly people, for instance active involvement in communities, volunteer work, intergenerational integration and the promotion of active participation in social services for other elderly people (MPiPS 2012: 10).

It may be beneficial to introduce new institutional solutions that would make it easier for elderly people to function socially. For example, in Germany there are senior citizen offices that employ highly qualified personnel to serve the role of partners for elderly citizens. Together, they go over the elderly person’s problems, looking for optimal solutions. The main goal of these offices is to strengthen awareness of self-sufficiency, regardless of age and disability. There are community services that provide help with everyday needs such as getting around in a wheelchair, having company on walks, and cleaning one’s house or yard. Spaces are also provided in which elderly people can meet, get to know new people and create support groups, under the constant supervision of specially trained staff and volunteers. It is important to note that volunteer work done by senior citizens is practically nonexistent in Poland.

It is obvious that elderly people cannot be grouped into a single category based on age. Hobbies, knowledge, and competence should be the basis of classification. That is why the possibilities offered to the elderly should consist of differentiated services, oriented toward the development of individual needs, easing and simplifying various basic tasks and allowing for self-realization. When considering the difficulties people face in maintaining contact with their community or in finding a place that accommodates their disabilities, one needs to be aware of the danger of the self-isolation of the afflicted parties, also known as auto-marginalization. To counteract this, it is necessary not only to help the elderly prepare for their lives, but to create organizations or institutions that provide an appropriate environment for the elderly to find their place in life.

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# **Old age in social policy**



## **Statistical data regarding the situation of elderly people in the databases of the Central Statistical Office – an outline of the issue**

### **Streszczenie**

W zasobach statystyki publicznej znajdują się różnorodne dane pozwalające na monitorowanie a nawet prognozowanie (głównie demograficzne) sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce. Dane te są jednak rozproszone, co wynika z charakteru ogółu badań prowadzonych przez Główny Urząd Statystyczny, jak i specyfiki badań dotyczących seniorów. Interesujące informacje można uzyskać korzystając (między innymi) zarówno z wyników badań dotyczących budżetów gospodarstw domowych, wolontariatu, opieki społecznej, rynku pracy, jak i prognoz demograficznych, czy skali zagrożenia ubóstwem. W referacie przedstawione zostanie zestawienie tych danych wraz z przykładami możliwości analitycznego wykorzystania danych gromadzonych przez polską statystykę publiczną w uwzględnieniu poziomu agregacji danych i zakresu ich udostępniania. Wybrane zagadnienia zostaną omówione na przykładach obrazujących specyfikę niektórych województw.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Badanie Aktywności Ekonomicznej Ludności, prognozy demograficzne, starzenie się ludności

### **Abstract**

Among statistical data published by the Central Statistical Office there is a variety of data, that allows for monitoring and even prognosis regarding the (mainly demographic) situation of elderly people in Poland. This data is not unified, though, due to the variety in types of surveys supervised by the Central Statistical Office, and because of the nature of research concerning elderly people. Interesting data can be found in household budget surveys, voluntary work, social care surveys and labour market surveys. This article presents the above-mentioned data and discusses possible analysis thereof, considering its level and range of dissemination. The issues in question are discussed with respect to particular voivodeships.

### **Key words:**

Central Statistical Office, Labour Force Survey, demographic predictions, aging of population

The Central Statistical Office has data and statistical information which allow one to monitor, and even to predict the situation of elderly people in Poland. This data is not unified, due to the variety in types of surveys supervised by the Central Statistical Office, and because of the nature of research concerning elderly people. When analysing statistical data about the situation of elderly people, it is always necessary to be aware of the age of the presented population groups – there is no one, stable age considered in

every survey, and that may lead to some problems in comparing data. The main document, that contains all information about every survey organized by the Central Statistical Office (CSO), is the Agenda of Statistical Surveys of Public Statistics in Poland, which is published every year once it has been accepted by the Prime Minister (*The Agenda of Statistical Surveys of Public Statistics in Poland*). A substantial part of all statistical information gathered by the CSO is published on the CSO website.

Interesting data can be found in household budget surveys, voluntary work surveys, social care surveys and labour market surveys. A good example of a publication in which data from different statistical surveys was used, is the brochure prepared by the Central Statistical Office in 2012 for the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (*Jak się żyje osobom starszym w Polsce? 2012*). What is important is that the information presented therein concerned only the general situation in Poland. It would be very interesting to examine information from different fields of social life in every Polish voivodeship, but it is not possible because of the organisation of particular surveys. That is why it is important to be aware of differences among various statistical data.

We would like to present demographical information about the population of Poland and a few voivodeships in particular, divided into age groups. Data concerning population state and structure are taken from the National General Census of People and Dwellings from 2011. The source of information about the labour activity of the population is a sample Labour Force Survey, which is carried on every quarter. Data from the Social Insurance Institution and the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund allowed us to analyse information about beneficiaries of both social insurance systems and the amount of welfare. Data concerning health can be found in various statistical sources, including the European Health Interview Survey, carried out every five years on a sample of the population; the last one was conducted in 2009. More current medical data is gathered by the CSO from respondents with use of a ZD-3 form (Report on treatment at an outpatients' clinic). It is also worth analysing data from the Polish Ministry of Health from surveys using MZ-29 (Report on general hospital activity) and PS-03 forms (Report of a stationary social care institution). Data about elder people's cultural activity are taken by the CSO from the K-03 (Library report) and K-07 forms (Report of community centre, club or youth club activities). All of this background knowledge is necessary in order to understand the proper way of using this information.

There are some basic notions used in public statistics in Poland, that are interesting in the context of the analysed subject, including: population aging – a process during which the percentage of elderly people in a given population increases;

- elderly persons – people who are 60 or 65 and above (which is connected with retirement age and the reception of a pension in Poland);
- economic activity – whether someone is employed, unemployed or economically inactive;

- retirement pay – an amount of money paid to a person who is insured, and from the moment the person fulfils two conditions, namely being 60 (in the case of women) or 65 (in the case of men) and having worked for some period of time while paying an insurance fee;
- social assistance house – an institution that offers care or educational assistance, as well as accommodation for residents;
- cultural institution – an institution that is either public or managed by local authorities and whose main statutory activity is in the field of culture.

In 2012 38 533 300 people were living in Poland (which was 1,0% more than in 2005). Problems related to demographic changes caused by changes in the proportions of age in society and by depopulation can be seen in the entire country. Observed and predicted changes are manifested in an increasing percentage of elderly people in the society, along with a decreasing percentage of persons 0–17 years old.

In 2012 people aged 65 and older constituted 14,2% of the population in Poland (which was about 0,9 points more than in 2005). Children and teenagers (0–17 years old) made up 20,6% (2,3 points less than in 2005), whereas predicted changes indicate that in 2035, in comparison to the end of 2012, the number of citizens in Poland will have fallen by 6,6%, which means that there will be 2 540 400 fewer people. Given this situation, it is simultaneously predicted that the number of people aged 65 and above may increase to 83 575. It is predicted that the percentage of elderly people in the Polish population is going to increase systematically – from 14,2% in 2012 to 23,2% in 2035<sup>1</sup>.

It would be interesting to investigate the economic activity of people in their pre-retirement period, since data obtained from the above-mentioned prognosis suggest that in the next 23 years a shift in the structure of the Polish population may occur where the largest percentage of the population (regarding men and women) will no longer be people aged 25–29, but those aged 50–54. Results of the Labour Force Survey show that among 13 256 000 people in Poland aged 15 and older, those aged 50 and above constituted 42,7% in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2011, which is an increase of roughly 1,2 points from the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2010. In the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2011, 4468 000 persons among those aged 50 and older were active on the labour market. It was 99 000 more than the year before. At the same time, among people aged 50 and above, 2 609 000 were disabled, only 324 000 (12,4%) of whom were active on the labour market. The majority of disabled people aged 50 and above who were active on the labour market were men – 179 000, i.e. 55,2%.

The percentage of professionally active people aged 50 and above in Poland increased by 33,7% in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2011. Among women it increased by 26,2%, and among the disabled by 12,4%. Among men it increased by 16,0%, which is 6,9 points higher than among women. Economically inactive persons constituted 66,3% of Poles

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<sup>1</sup> All demographic information can be found in the Local Information Database: [http://www.stat.gov.pl/bdl/app/strona.html?p\\_name=indeks](http://www.stat.gov.pl/bdl/app/strona.html?p_name=indeks) [Retrieved March 3, 2013], as well as in the national Demography Database: <http://demografia.stat.gov.pl/bazademografia/> [Retrieved March 3, 2013].

aged 15 years and above in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2011, according to the Labour Force Survey. During 2011, 6 336 000 economically inactive persons retired. Information about the situation of people over 50 on the labour market is prepared by the CSO and the Statistical Office in Bydgoszcz every year (*People over 50 on the Labour Market in 2011*); most data concern the situation in particular voivodeships. Economically inactive people include retired persons and pensioners, thus data concerning their situation are connected with social insurance data. Pensioners can receive their benefits, as was mentioned above, either from the Social Insurance Institution or the Agricultural Social Insurance Fund. In 2012 in Poland there were 7 741 700 pensioners and retired persons, to whom benefits were paid from the non-agricultural social insurance system. Among them, 5 237 000 people received their retirement pay. In comparison with 2011, the overall number of pensioners decreased by 0,7%, while the latter number decreased by 0,1%. Analogous benefits were received by 1 285 700 farmers. Among them were 10 219 000 retired persons, aged 60 years old or above (in the case of women) and 65 and above (in the case of men). It meant a 3,3% decrease from 2011. Retired persons and pensioners made up 23,4% of the population in Poland; a 0,3 point decrease from 2011. The average retirement pay under the non-agricultural social insurance system in 2012 in Poland amounted to 1938,09 zlotys, which was 5,1% more than in the previous year, whereas the average benefit paid to farmers amounted to 1097,75 zlotys, which was 6,7% more than in 2011.

The average retirement pay varied with respect to voivodeships. The highest one was paid in the Silesian Voivodeship, where benefits under the non-agricultural social insurance system in 2012 amounted to 2271,93 zlotys and was 4,5% higher than in 2011. The same benefits paid in 2012 in the Podkarpackie Voivodeship amounted to 1549,66 zlotys. Farmers in the Silesian Voivodeship also received the highest benefits (1307,80 zlotys; a 5,5% increase from 2011), whereas those in the Masovian Voivodeship received the lowest (1014,74 zlotys). This was an obvious reason for differences in lifestyle and material situation among retired people in Poland. What is more, the level of retirement pay was significantly lower than the average salary. The last available data about salaries in Poland date from 2011. The smallest difference between salary and retirement pay was noticed – again – in the Silesian Voivodeship: retirement pay there amounted to 0,6 of an average salary. The most significant difference was noted in the Mosovian Voivdeship, where retirement pay amounted to 0,4 of an average salary.

It can be noticed that there are systematically fewer people in Poland who gain their pension because of disability, and more who are paid a pension after reaching an established age threshold. It can be connected with the state of health of the population as a whole. According to results of the European Health Interview Survey, 16,1% of the Polish population (5,3 million people) is disabled. One of the highest percentages of disability people was noted in the population of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship,

where it was 16,1%. Among people aged 50–69 this percentage increased by 25,0% in 2009, whereas among people aged 70 and above it increased by 45,2%. 38,5% of respondents aged 50 to 69 assessed their health condition as very good. Among respondents aged 70 and above, the number is 14,6%. It needs to be emphasized that 69,9% of respondents aged 50–69 stated that they have long-term health problems, and 76,9% of them report suffering from various chronic diseases. Among respondents aged 70 and above those numbers were 91,3 and 93,2% respectively. The most often indicated diseases or complaints were high blood pressure (indicated by 48,2% of persons 50–69 years old who suffer from chronic diseases or complaints and 58,5% of respondents aged 70 and above) and backache (42,0% of persons aged 50–69 who suffer from chronic diseases or complaints and 41,9% of respondents aged 70 and above). The results of the quoted survey show that people in their 50s constitute the most significant number of patients of hospitals in Poland. The oldest group of respondents, aged 70 and above, constituted 21,8% of patients of Polish hospitals (The State of Health of the Polish Population 2011). Nevertheless, elderly people very rarely make use of the care provided in social assistance houses. In 2012 in Poland there were 876 centres of this kind (including branches of those houses), in which 19 700 elderly people lived. The Masovian Voivodeship had the highest number of residents of social assistance centres, but proportionally, the Opolskie Voivodeship had the highest number of such residents per 10 000 citizens (10 people for every 10 000 citizens), whereas in the Masovian Voivodeship this number was 7 people for every 10 000 citizens. People making use of the services provided by social assistance houses are not strongly represented among people aged 60 and above. In Poland in 2012 they constituted 0,2% of the population; the number being higher only in the Masovian and Silesian Voivodeships at just over 0,3%.

These observations suggest that the majority of elderly people in Poland live independently, and – among various fields of a social life – participation in cultural events can prove this inference. For example, in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship in 2012, registered users of public libraries included 38 200 people aged 45–60 (in 2011 there very 37 800 readers in this age group) and 26 200 people aged 60 and above (in 2011 that number was 24 600). These readers respectively constituted 13,1% and 9,0% of all readers of public libraries in the voivodeship (in 2011 the numbers were 12,6% and 8,1% respectively). 4 600 persons in the voivodeship aged 55 and above were members of various artistic bands and groups attached to cultural institutions or clubs (in 2011 there were 2 000 people involved in similar activities). 8 400 people in the above-mentioned age group were members of various clubs, which constituted 49,2% of all members of such clubs in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship (in 2011 the number was 48,0%). In 2012, nearly 500 persons aged 55 and above completed courses and training of many kinds offered by cultural institutions in the voivodeship. They made up more than 15,0% of all people who had completed those courses (in 2011 the number was 16,2%) (*Culture in 2012*).

Despite different limits which delineate old age and differences among presented data (and other statistical data), a significant degree of population ageing can be observed in Poland. This phenomenon is characteristic of the majority of nations in Europe. Given this situation, further research based on statistical data concerning the situation of old people is inevitable. Nevertheless, it need to be emphasized that the data regarding this subject are not unified and there is a strong necessity to analyse them very consciously.

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## **International initiatives for the benefit of senior citizens**

### **Streszczenie**

Prognozy demograficzne wskazują jednoznacznie, iż zagadnienia z zakresu starzenia się ludności wykazują tendencje wzrostowe i uchodzą za poważny, postępujący problem demograficzny zarówno w skali światowej, europejskiej, jak i poszczególnych państw. Należy zwrócić uwagę na fakt, iż kraje Europy Zachodniej posiadają ogromne doświadczenie w sferze omawianej problematyki ze względu na to, że kwestie starzenia się ich społeczeństw wystąpiły znacznie wcześniej aniżeli w Polsce. Wysokie wskaźniki populacji osób w wieku poprodukcyjnym przyczyniają się do tego, że wyrażenie „Stary Kontynent” nabiera nowego znaczenia. W obliczu procesu starzenia się ludności istotne znaczenie mają licznie funkcjonujące podmioty działające w obronie interesów ludzi starszych wiekiem. Ich działalność sprowadza się przede wszystkim do zadań związanych z ochroną praw oraz zapobieganiu marginalizacji seniorów w różnych sferach życia społecznego. Dodatkowo w większości poszczególnych państw funkcjonują lokalne ugrupowania działające na rzecz osób w trzeciej tercji życia. Warto podkreślić, iż pokolenie trzeciej generacji może wnieść wiele korzyści w relacjach międzypokoleniowych poprzez wiedzę oraz nabywane przez całe życie bogate doświadczenie. Przejawia się to przede wszystkim w wykazywanej aktywności obywatelskiej a także wśród pełnionych przez seniorów ról społecznych.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

proces starzenia, jakość życia, organizacje międzynarodowe

### **Abstract**

Population projections clearly indicate that issues concerning population ageing are increasing and pose a serious, continuous, demographic problem for individual states as well as Europe and the world. It should be noted that Western European countries have vast experience in the field of the problems in question, due to the fact that issues of population ageing had occurred much earlier there than they did in Poland. A high ratio of people of retirement age contributes to the fact that the expression “Old Continent” takes on a new meaning. In the face of the population ageing process, numerous entities which protect the interests of the elderly play an important role. They focus primarily on protecting the rights and preventing the marginalization of senior citizens in various spheres of social life. Furthermore, local groups promoting the well-being of the elderly operate in most countries. It is worth noting that the older generation can bring many benefits to intergenerational relationships through their knowledge and rich life experience. This manifests itself primarily in civic activity and social roles taken on and performed by senior citizens.

### **Key words:**

population ageing, quality of life, international organizations

Population ageing in particular societies at a global, European and national level, including Poland, is considered to be a serious demographic problem. The topic of population ageing, which is the result of a significant increase in the average duration of human life, is a multifaceted issue. More and more often this topic is becoming the subject of public debate. Population projections clearly indicate that issues concerning population ageing are increasing and pose a serious, continuous, demographic problem for individual states, Europe and the world. Due to the aforementioned multidimensional nature of the problem and various consequences of the irreversible phenomenon of the increasing number of people of retirement age, as well as increasing life expectancy, this topic raises a lot of interest within academic circles representing disciplines as wide-ranging as gerontology, social policy, demography, economics, sociology, psychology, medicine and public health. The phenomenon of population ageing manifests itself in almost every sphere of life. What is especially noteworthy is its impact on the economy, society and politics. As a consequence of this issue, organisations and other entities working for the benefit of senior citizens are becoming increasingly significant.

Their main objective is to protect the rights of older people and to prevent discrimination against them in many areas of social life. Moreover, they strive first and foremost to change the approach to the issues of old age and the ageing process; to counteract the wide-spread cult of youth. In addition, many organizations help make it possible to meet the various needs of older people. As Zofia Szarota points out, during this demographic revolution, various associations and federations have been formed for the purpose of preventing situations in which the age of an individual is a factor of social, cultural, professional and economic marginalization (Szarota 2004b).

In the twentieth century, the problem of the social exclusion of senior citizens has been recognized by international organizations, the public and the governments of developed countries. Since the 80s, actions have been taken to tackle stereotypes and improper attitudes towards the elderly (Bombol and Słaby 2011).

It is obvious that old age boundaries are being systematically moved forward, as in the past a 60-year-old man was considered old. People want to be young for as long as possible and do not want to live passively. In Western countries, this is expressed in different forms of social activity, organized leisure and recreation, in an explosion of self-help groups and in participation in political movements for the benefit and recognition of the older generation (Synak 2000).

The American *Gray Panthers*, founded by Meggi Kuhn in 1970, is considered the most famous organization for senior citizens in the world. The organization has set itself four main objectives:

- to promote positive attitudes towards older people and combat negative stereotypes associated with old age;
- to expose ageism and abuse against the elderly;

- to influence policy in support of the rights of the elderly;
- to organize local “nests” of the association in order to achieve a faster resolution of senior citizens’ problems in their local communities.

Estimated at about fifty thousand members, the organization has been dealing mainly with age-related discrimination in employment and the problem of medicinal abuse, and has been fighting for the participation of older people in the decision-making process. It has organised demonstrations, pickets and lobbies for better health care for the elderly, as well as fairer presentation of senior citizens in the media. It has published programmes and books. The *Gray Panthers*’ rhetoric sounds as if it were aimed at removing age barriers, but the association’s efforts seem to be directed towards providing rights for both young and old, albeit mostly for the elderly (Halicki 2000).

Among American organizations defending the interests of retired people the *American Association of Retired People*, founded in 1958 by Ethel Percy Andrus, is also noteworthy. According to its mission statement, it is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization for people aged 50 and over, created to improve the quality of life for all senior citizens. It offers a wide range of unique benefits, special products and services for its members. Currently, the AARP is considered the most powerful and well-organized lobby for the elderly in the United States (<http://www.aarp.org>). In the sphere of social policy it is the most influential pressure group. It devises information campaigns, organizes meetings for older people with similar interests and provides advice in many areas, ranging from taxes to health (Kowalak 1996).

Two organizations of global significance merit particular attention:

– The *International Federation on Ageing*, which was established in 1973 as a United Nations agency based in Montreal. The federation launches initiatives concerned with establishing laws and rules regulating the situation of older people in social and civic life, as senior citizens should have a guarantee of full participation in the political and cultural life of their communities. The IFA’s mission is to create positive change for older people around the world by stimulating, collecting, analysing and disseminating information on the laws, rules and practices that improve the quality of life of older people (<http://www.ifa-fiv.org>).

– *HelpAge International* is a global network of non-profit organizations working on national, regional and local levels. It was established in 1983 and brings together members from 49 countries worldwide. It mainly operates in developing states, with the mission of working with older people and for their benefit in order to achieve a sustainable improvement of the quality of their lives, as well as seeking to ensure that the voice of older people, especially those in a situation of disadvantage, is taken into account (Szarota 2002a).

Furthermore, the following European organizations should be noted:

– The *European Federation of the Elderly*, established in 1962 in Luxembourg. The aim of the federation is to promote intergenerational solidarity and to maintain older

people's self-reliance and independence, to support the participation of the elderly in the decision-making process, and to give support to the development of democracy and the promotion of self-help. It makes efforts to improve the lives of older people, attempts to prevent discrimination associated with old age, and strives to ensure the financial security of the elderly. EURAG's work is based on work-groups and committees considering the specific problems of the older generation as well as drafting and promoting proposals and motions in the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the UN, the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organisation. Moreover, its tasks include coordination, cooperation and exchange of views with experts and service organizations, self-help groups as well as individual people, and organizing international conferences for the elderly addressing specific age-related issues (Szarota 2010c).

– *Federation Internationale des Associations des Personnes Agees*, based in Paris, was founded in 1980. Its mission is to raise awareness that ageing is not only a demographic problem, but a social one as well, and that older people are willing to participate fully in society. The FIAPA's objectives can be implemented in each country and at an international level through the establishment of action programmes for member organizations in regard to family, health and the involvement of senior citizens in work for the society. The association organizes evaluation seminars covering comprehensive projects and achievements as well as meetings with local organizations in the country in which they operate (Szarota 2010c).

Councils of seniors, where the elderly can get involved in political activities, are also noteworthy. Such councils are mainly engaged in the discussion of decisions related to the elderly and in lobbying for friendly solutions for said age group. Local authorities in Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden resort to the aid of e.g. advisory councils which is comprised of senior citizens. The first Councils of Seniors were established in Germany in the 1970s. Their growth peaked in the 1980s and 1990s – e.g. in 1995 there were 500 Councils of Seniors, and 750 just a year later. In Denmark, in 1980, for 270 magistrates (municipalities) there were only four Councils of Seniors, but by 1997 their number had increased to 200 (Borowska and Dobranowska-Wittels 2007).

In Poland, in turn, only a few Councils of Seniors have been formed in larger cities. By the end of 2012, 27 Councils of Seniors had been established, but their number is constantly increasing (Nowicka 2013). For example, in the Silesian voivodeship, only two municipal Councils of Seniors exist. The first was constituted in 2010. It operates in Gliwice as an advisory body to the local authorities, giving opinions on the quality of life of older people. The purpose of the Council is to represent older people's organizations, diagnose problems, and to present the situation of senior citizens to the mayor and committees of the city council, together with conclusions and proposed solutions. The assembly

gives its opinions on the resolutions concerning senior citizens and collaborates with institutions dealing with similar topics (<http://www.wolontariat.gcop.gliwice.pl>).

The second Council of Seniors was initiated by the mayor of Jastrzębie-Zdrój as an advisory body dealing with the problems of the elderly. The purpose of the Council is to work with the mayor of the city and help realize the potential and maximize the time of older people, promote culture and education in said social group, provide advice and submit proposals for the development and benefit of the elderly (Syjut 2013).

The many consequences of the increase in number of people of retirement age affects society as a whole, as well as individuals. In the face of population ageing, numerous organizations and associations for the elderly – not only on an international, but also on a national and local level – have been formed. Their main goal is to protect the rights and to prevent the marginalization of retired people in all spheres of social life. The knowledge and extensive life experience of the elderly may be beneficial for inter-generational relationships. This may be frequently observed in the civic activity and social roles of senior citizens.

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# **Marginal of elderly people towards social acceptance. Changes in attitudes to seniors on the example of social help institution**

## **Streszczenie**

W ciągu ostatnich kilku dekad zauważamy istotne zmiany postaw wobec seniorów. Przyczyn jest wiele. Z jednej strony są one spowodowane zmianami demograficznymi i rosnącym procesem starzenia się populacji. Z drugiej zaś ludzie starsi stają się coraz bardziej aktywni, widoczni, niezależni, zadbani, uczestniczą w pełni w różnych obszarach życia społecznego. Zmiany postaw wobec seniorów przebiegają od marginalizacji do akceptacji i od bierności do aktywności. Instytucje pomocy stacjonarnej takie jak np. domy pomocy społecznej również ewoluowały od instytucji totalnych, zamkniętych ku instytucjom demokratycznym, otwartym.

Artykuł jest próbą ukazania zmiany miejsca seniorów w społeczeństwie na przykładzie domów pomocy społecznej.

## **Słowa kluczowe:**

ludzie starszy, seniorzy, instytucje pomocy społecznej, marginalizacja, akceptacji

## **Abstract**

For over two decades we have been seeing changes in attitudes towards the elderly. There are many reasons for these changes. On the one hand they are caused by demographic change and the growing process of population ageing, and therefore changes in the communities offering various types of activity to senior citizens. On the other, senior citizens present themselves as active, independent, well-groomed, and able to participate fully in society. The picture of senior citizens enclosed within the walls of the house, passive, sick and with no needs is slowly becoming history. Changes in social attitudes toward seniors run from marginalization to acceptance and from passivity to activity. A specific example of such changes are social welfare homes that have transformed from closed institutions into open, democratic institutions offering numerous types of activation. This article is an attempt to show the changes towards senior citizens using the example of social help institutions.

## **Key words:**

old person, senior citizen, social help institutions, marginalization, acceptance

## **1. Old people's place in society - past and present**

Previously, old people were seen as unnecessary, useless burdens for the family, due to their lack of livelihood and the inability to work because of physical weakness. Moreover, their looks repelled others because of the low level of development of medical science and hygiene. Primary society – as reported by the history of humankind –

manifested reluctance towards the elderly. They were seen as a heavy burden, as elderly people ate more than they earn or hunt (Szarota 2004: 6). Humanity's move from a phase of gathering and hunting to agriculture has improved the lot of old people who have become useful on farms. History reports significantly more negative than positive attitudes. Most often old people engendered negative feelings; even anxiety and disgust. Old people indicated the transience and vanity of the world (Minois 1995: 134). The prestige of the elderly has increased with the civilizing of humanity. In the history of humankind there are two attitudes towards the elderly, namely gerontophobia, i.e. the perception of elderly people as a social burden, which, in extreme cases, lead to their extermination, and gerontocracy, i.e. the privilege and social prestige of the elderly (Szarota 2004, Wiśniewska-Roszkowska 1989).

Sex determined old people's place in society. Men generally occupied a higher position than women. Men was presented as old, poor people who deserved help, and women as the "old ones" to whom ugliness and depravity were attributed (Bois 1996: 56). In gerontocratic societies, men fulfilled important roles in politics or religion, thus their social position was slightly higher than that of women. Care for the elderly did not differ from care of other population groups. The common element of all people who need help was misery. Advanced age and poverty put the elderly on the margins of society and qualified them as useless. Back then charitable institutions or organizations did not bestow any privileges on the elderly. This group of people was placed in institutions along with orphans, the infirm and the homeless, all of whom occupied the margins of society.

Attitudes towards elderly people only changed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and there were many factors involved. The most important factor was the social security system for senior citizens and the granting of essential services to retirees. Other factors were associated with the development of medical and social science – especially gerontology, where the focus was on old people and their needs. Another important factor was the development and equal rights of the individual, regardless of gender, education or age. The earlier term "old person" changed to the modern "senior citizen".

The change in place and role of old people in society did not take place violently, but it was slow process, which is still continuing. Currently, certain environments are still unfavourable to senior citizens. Old people they face discrimination and marginalization, and do not always have a place in their own families. Old age is not attractive because of the dominant cult of youth in the modern world, so there are cases of public exclusion of the elderly (Jakubowska 2009: 240–241). Moreover, the rise of individualism means that children do not have to take responsibility for helping their ageing parents. There are also other forms of discrimination against senior citizens such as in healthcare and banks (Szarota 2010: 118). But positive changes for the benefit of older people such as the creation of better, comfortable and specialized institutions providing

care and assistance are far more noticeable; an example being nursing homes that are still evolving to meet more and more individual needs of senior citizens.

## **2. Old people in nursing homes - an example of a total institution**

The first state-appointed institutions that provided services to older people were nursing homes. On 16 August 1923 the Social Services Act laid the legal foundations for these institutions. Nursing homes were institutions in which the elderly and physically and mentally disabled could find shelter and day care. The social welfare system focused on meeting the needs of the necessities of life, and so was often described as a system of social emergency. Such a role was played by nursing homes, whose tasks were limited to meeting the basic needs of living and preventing starvation.

Nursing homes had a low standard of service and introduced discipline and isolation from the outside world have become known as total institutions. According to E. Goffman, a limiting character of total institutions often represents physical barriers to prevent contact with the outside world: closed doors, high walls, barbed wire fences, steep banks or water, open space, etc. (Goffman 2006: 316).

In total institutions Erving Goffman distinguished two distinct worlds: the world of subordinates and the staff world. The staff world aims to “treat people” – it is a matter of the formation of subordinates according to certain patterns. Once subordinates enter a total institution by the, *the process of degradation* begins, which is done by storing personal items in the warehouse, limiting contact with the outside world, the suspension of family plans and professional subordinates, etc. Furthermore, a process of *deprivation of personality* takes place, which is reflected in the system of power that staff has over subordinates (Goffman 2006). All of these elements of a total institution characterized nursing homes. Some other features should be added, such as the excessive concentration of residents (the rooms were overcrowded and in the same house as many as 200-300 people lived), the low level of education of the personnel, an institutional way of meeting needs (Tarkowska 1997: 123–124) and a lack of contact with the environment because of architectural barriers or isolation from the outside world due to difficulties in mobility particularly in the case of people with disabilities.

Older people in a nursing home could only satisfy their basic needs: they received a place to sleep, food and care. At that time, nursing homes acted as “storage”. The life of inhabitants in nursing homes at that time was quite monotonous. According to Leon Grela: “Meal times determine the daily rhythm. Then the inhabitants are left basically to themselves and how they use and fill the day depends on them” (1980: 16). The standard of living of residents in nursing homes at that time left much to be desired. The most visible problems were difficult housing conditions and excessive population. Architectural

barriers such as stairs and a lack of lifts and ramps meant that people could not move freely within the institution, or leave it. Food was also quite poor (Czerwinski 1957: 9–10). The low position of the elderly in society was maintained in nursing homes.

At the turn of 1970s and 1980s the first criticism of welfare institutions which guaranteed only basic care and nursing services appeared. The condition and deficit of social welfare, especially in terms of housing and material standard, were criticized. The source material suggests that before 1956 70% of nursing homes were in buildings built during the interwar period or even before the First World War (Staręga-Piasek 1982: 8–12). Attention was paid to the low growth of these institutions in relation to the needs and demographic data supporting an aging society. Social policy towards the elderly was not ideal. The creation of decent living conditions, improved housing, proper health and social care and opportunities for professional activity for the elderly were proposed. In addition the development of community-based services for the oldest member of society was demanded, along with an increase in staff at elderly people's places of residence. Alternatives for the care of elderly people were requested, not in the form of an increase in the number of nursing homes and the number of places in these homes, but also in the establishment of residential homes for the elderly.

Over the years, nursing homes transformed from closed institutions, known as total institutions, into open ones. The change was quite thorough and included changes in terminology – e.g. the term “residents” was replaced with the modern “people”. Significant changes have taken place in the material dimension, i.e. in the standard of the buildings and the extent and quality of services. In addition, there has been a move from basic, minimal to specialized benefits; a transformation of “care” to “help”. The attitudes of the population have changed: what used to be seen as treatment has become empowerment.

### **3. Circumstances of senior citizens in social care homes**

Change in residential care for the elderly took place only thanks the law on social assistance of 1990. Introduction of the term “help” definitively broke with the former term “care”, especially with respect to the elderly, the ill and invalids. The social welfare system definitely differed from the social service system. Also, thanks to the development of social geriatrics and gerontology, much more attention has been paid to the elderly. Widespread gerontological literature left no doubt that the system of assistance to the elderly should be improved and institutional forms of assistance revised. The older population have moved from the periphery to the center of interest in social policy.

In a new law dated 29 November 1990, social welfare homes were defined as units to meet living, educational, social and religious needs (Journal of Laws No. 87, item

506). There was a change of terminology: “inmates” became “inhabitants”; “care homes” became “welfare homes”. People rights were definitely expanded: obligations could no longer exceed the abilities of residents, the number of people in the house was limited to 100 (then to 60), and it was recommended that single and double rooms take the place of multiple-bed rooms. There were precisely defined ways of meeting people’s needs in food (in terms of food quantity and quality), as well as underwear, clothing and footwear. Above all, more attention was paid to the people themselves. Social welfare organizations began to focus on the inhabitants and their individual needs, taking into account their health and dexterity, and their right to choose and maintain independence, and enabling the development of personality. Isolation and passivity started to be replaced by integration activities and activation of inhabitants.

The range of activity available to residents confirmed the repositioning of inhabitants in these institutions. Forms of activation of senior citizens in social welfare homes are varied, encompassing the greatest possible use of all forms of activity. Gerontologists underline the importance and significance of active ageing. They note that over the years, remaining active is of particular importance. Activity is a condition of playing social roles, functioning in a group, and being present in the community. A lack of active ageing can lead to loneliness. The benefits of activation of senior citizens are huge.

First of all, activity allows senior citizens to maintain their physical and mental health, it stimulates the imagination and creativity, and teaches them to live together in a group, thus slowing the ageing process. Doctors admit that a positive attitude towards one another, faith in the meaning of life and cheerfulness have the power to support rehabilitation and the treatment of various diseases (Zawada 2010: 68). Practitioners point out that activated older residents of social welfare homes feel better, experience improved morale, become more confident and less demanding, rest better at night, cause less trouble, and show an increased interest in life and their environment (Zaniewska 1995: 14). The level of activity of the inhabitants largely depends on the staff of the social welfare home in question. An activating atmosphere is important in a welfare home, as Jan Gielas accentuates, saying that an activating climate goes beyond care, i.e. ensuring that senior citizens are “clean, fed and relaxed” (2001: 6). The obligation of staff to activate inhabitants is another positive development in these institutions.

Comparing the life of senior citizens in today’s social welfare home to nursing homes in the past, we see diametric differences that are easily analyzed in three areas. The first relates to material conditions: from gray buildings with a low standard and without lifts and ramps, located on the outskirts of the city, and crowded hospital rooms, there was a move to colourful, renovated or newly built buildings in localized urban centers, where lifts, ramps, bathrooms and even floors (with anti-slip carpets or tiles) are

tailored to the needs of disabled seniors, and where colorful interiors and single and double instead of multiple rooms have become the standard.

The second area sets the standard of service that has expanded from catering to essential needs for food, health and care, to meeting the domestic, educational, religious, social, cultural, recreational and other needs of individuals. Senior citizens are offered a whole range of different forms of activities, from occupational therapy through participation in cultural events (e.g. going to the cinema, the theater or concerts), trips and pilgrimages. In addition, many forms of activities are tailored to the individual needs of residents, e.g. for people with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

The third area involves changes in the attitude of staff members towards residents. In the previous social welfare system, uncertainty of employment and lack of specialist training dominated, while currently skills and professionalism are emphasized in professional help. Much is said about making things easier for professionals who work with older people. The staff is expected to play an active role for the inhabitants, who should be helped, encouraged and mobilized to lead an active and productive life. At the same time they are expected to tray and create appropriate conditions and an appropriate atmosphere in the social welfare home.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The collected material shows that in the past older people occupied a very low position in society and were treated as economic burdens. A lack of usefulness in the family was followed by a low position within or exclusion from society for those not able to work due to age and health. Civilized societies have completely changed their attitudes toward the elderly, the sick and the disabled – in other words, those who are weak and dependent on others. People are no longer seen in economic terms, but have gained rights in recognition of their humanity. International documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), have played an essential role. Recognition of the dignity and rights of all people regardless of race, gender, age or health status has completely changed the fate of those who were already marginalized in society.

The changes that have occurred in nursing homes indicate the transition of older people from the periphery to the center, from marginalization to acceptance, from treatment to empowerment, and from passivity to activity. It is not only the position of the elderly that has changed in nursing homes where previously only their basic needs were satisfied, but the structure and organization of these institutions have also changed. Currently, in addition to meeting the basic needs of inhabitants, welfare homes provide support and activation. In order to provide services, professional staff is employed. However, this fundamental transformation of the institution of social welfare homes would have been difficult without legislative changes, the development of particular

areas of study such as social gerontology, and the changes taking place on an international level.

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## **Senior residents of Silesian cities and the social welfare system: challenges and dilemmas for local communities**

### **Streszczenie**

Zaprezentowany artykuł powstał w oparciu o badania i analizy zjawisk i problemów społecznych, jakie prowadzono od 2000 roku w Siemianowicach Śląskich. Podjęte rozważania odnosiły się między innymi do istotnej kwestii jaką jest funkcjonowanie seniorów w społecznościach lokalnych, a także seniorzy jako beneficjenci systemu wsparcia społecznego.

W wyniku analiz otrzymano potwierdzenie, że seniorzy dążą do utrzymywania aktywności życiowej w różnych formach. Obok tych, które oferuje system pomocy społecznej, znaczny odsetek osób starszych poszukuje takich obszarów aktywności, które zarówno dają satysfakcję, jak poczucie bycia potrzebnym dla innych. W dobie starzenia się społeczeństwa, w tym społeczności Siemianowic Śląskich, należy podejmować takie działania w postaci programów czy projektów, które pozwolą osobom starszym, na jak najdłuższe zachowanie samodzielności i niezależności. A to oznacza, że lokalna polityka wobec osób starszych i starości winna wykraczać swym zakresem daleko poza ochronę zdrowia i pomoc społeczną, jako obszary zorientowane na osoby starsze.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

seniorzy, emeryci, śląskie miasta, społeczności lokalne, polityka społeczna.

### **Abstract**

The present study focuses on problems and challenges related to the needs of the elderly community, to be faced by local governments and other institutions that provide care and support to various social groups. These problems include economic factors (i.e. limited and often insufficient income), ailments, disabilities and chronic conditions affecting everyday existence, limited mobility and, in some cases, social alienation. In view of modern approaches to ageing which stress the importance of happiness and satisfaction derived from participation in the life of the local community, represented here by the theories of Helen Bee and George Maddox, it seems obvious that one of the most urgent goals facing social welfare and support systems is the development of programmes and schemes to help the elderly preserve their self-reliance and independence as much as possible given the present stage of development in medicine and social economy, while simultaneously enabling them to contribute to their social environment.

### **Key words:**

senior citizens, pensioners, local communities, social policy.

Old age or advanced adulthood is a time of essentially personal and individual experience and, above all, a period of life whose beginnings are largely individual. Therefore there can never be a clear-cut borderline which could specifically denote the moment of reaching the transition to old age. Various sources refer to a 3- or even 4-point

scale (Straś-Romanowska 2000). According to the WHO, people are classified as old from the age of 60, yet in countries like Poland (in line with the current convention adopted by the Polish Central Statistical Office) the onset of old age is associated with the end of one's working age, i.e. the moment of transition to retirement. When referring to senior citizens it should be remembered that one of the most frequently quoted distinctive features is the subcategory of age.

Helen Bee (2004) proposed grouping the elderly into three categories: the young old (aged 60–75), old old (aged 75–85) and oldest old (aged 85 and over) (p. 545). These categories are distinguished by, besides age, differences in physical and mental capabilities, the level of risk associated with health problems and the presence of emotional disturbances (p. 545).

It is therefore obvious that ageing is a dynamic and continuous process of changes occurring in time, covering three basic criteria which constitute the framework for these changes. One can mention the biological criterion, which is defined by substantial (transparent) physiological changes affecting the human body. The second criterion – psychological – takes into account changes related to cognitive, emotional, motivational and personality processes (Straś-Romanowska 2011). The third criterion refers to socio-economic aspects, which are determined by the profound impact of economic, institutional and sociological factors on the life of senior citizens.

Elderly people are quite often perceived in a relatively stereotypical manner as withdrawn from society, which is due to specific associations identifying them as professionally inactive, ill and prone to complaining. This view is contradicted by the disengagement theory of *Elaine Cummings* and *William Henry* (Turner, Helms 1999), which sees ageing as the process of mutual disengagement of the elderly and the social system they are part of. This disengagement from the society, which is a gradual process, should not be understood as a negative experience for an elderly person. Ageing, according to the disengagement theory, is a period of increased reflection and concentration on one's own self. This is also a period of decreased emotional development in matters concerning other people and events. Thus, ageing can in many cases be a time of positive perception of oneself and one's experiences, with disengagement being regarded as a natural process.

However, from a demographic perspective, there has been a considerable rise in the elderly population, which can be demonstrated using the example of Siemianowice Śląskie – a city located in Upper Silesia. According to demographers, by the year 2030 the retired population will account for 24% of the country's entire population, with Silesia being one of three provinces, along with Western Pomerania and Łódzkie, characterized by the highest percentage of senior citizens (Jelonek 2004). As it turns out, data concerning Siemianowice Śląskie corroborates this tendency. The table below shows the ratio of elderly people to the entire city population in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. century.

**TABLE 1: Post-retirement population figures for Siemianowice Śląskie in the period 2000–2010.**

YEAR	POST-RETIREMENT AGE POPULATION	ABSOLUTE FIGURE		%
2000	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	<b>10 340</b>	<b>[75 645]</b>	<u>13,6 %</u>
		7 310 70,1 %	3 030 29,3 %	9,6 % 4,0 %
2003	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	<b>11 217</b>	<b>[73 536]</b>	<u>15,2 %</u>
		7 745 69,1 %	3 472 30,9 %	10,5 % 4,7 %
2004	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	<b>11 571</b>	<b>[73 155]</b>	15,8 %
		7 914 68,3 %	3 657 31,6 %	20,8 % 10,3 %
2005	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	<b>11 685</b>	<b>[72 869]</b>	<u>16,0 %</u>
		7 961 68,1 %	3 724 31,9 %	10,9 % 5,1 %
2006	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	<b>13 728</b>	<b>[72 247]</b>	<u>19,0 %</u>
		8 091 58,9 %	5 637 41,1 %	21,5 % 16,2 %
2007	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	<b>12 351</b>	<b>[71 621]</b>	<u>17,3 %</u>
		8 283 67,0 %	4 068 33,0 %	11,6 % 5,7 %
2008	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	<b>12 565</b>	<b>[71 118]</b>	<u>17,7 %</u>
		8 427 67,0 %	4 138 33,0 %	11,9 % 5,8 %
2009	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	12 857	[70 712]	<u>18,2 %</u>
		8 697 67,6 %	4 160 32,3 %	23,6 % 12,2 %
2010	POST-RETIREMENT AGE: 66 [61] AND OLDER INCLUDING: <b>WOMEN: 61 AND OLDER</b> MEN: 66 AND OLDER	13 092	[70 291]	<u>18,6 %</u>
		8 970 68,5 %	4 122 31,4 %	24,4 % 12,2 %

Source: data obtained from the Regional Statistical Office

The systematic increase in the number of the elderly recorded in statistics may also be the result of other vital demographic indicators, which for several years have boded ill for the city of Siemianowice Śląskie. The two factors in question are birth rate and balance of migration.

**TABLE 2: Birth rate and migration balance in Siemianowice Śląskie in the period 2000–2010**

YEAR	BIRTH RATE IN %	BALANCE OF MIGRATION %
2000	- 1,97	- 3,70
2001	- 2,6	- 2,2
2002	- 2,4	- 2,4
2003	- 2,9	- 2,8
2004	- 1,6	- 2,9
2005	- 2,7	- 5,1
2006	- 3,2	- 3,6
2007	- 2,68	- 4,6
2008	- 1,88	- 3,28
2009	- 2,5	- 3,29
2010	- 2,0	- 3,93

Source: data obtained from the Regional Statistical Office

Even though incomplete, the statistical data shown above constitutes an important point of reference as regards the daily functioning of the elderly in the city and its unique institution, the Municipal Social Welfare Centre. Thus it needs to be established who among the senior citizens of Siemianowice Śląskie applies for the Centre's support and on what forms of assistance these people rely.

The key message from the analysed data is that among both city residents and people receiving social welfare support, the elderly population displays systematic growth.

**TABLE 3: Percentage of senior citizens as applicants and as members of applicant families within the social welfare system in Siemianowice Śląskie in the period 2000–2010**

YEAR	SENIOR APPLICANTS [total number] %			SENIOR CITIZENS –FAMILY MEMBERS [total number] %		
2000	[2 918]	658	22,5			
2002	[3 285]	498	15,1			
2003	[3 463]	477	13,7	[5 227]	362	6,9
2004	[3 157]	443	14,0	[4 837]	154	3,1
2005	[3 224]	430	13,3	[4 869]	108	2,2
2006	[2 833]	379	13,3	[4 048]	90	2,2
2007	[2 916]	377	12,9	[3 904]	80	2,0
2008	[2 916]	377	12,9	[3 904]	80	2,0
2009	[2 895]	331	11,4	[3 635]	49	1,3
2010	[2 951]	282	9,5	[3 841]	77	2,0

Source: data obtained from the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Siemianowice Śląskie.

The obtained data shows unequivocally that elderly people account for slightly over 13% of the entire welfare centre community, with the early 2000s, when the Social Welfare Act was passed, being an exceptional period. Under the then-existing legal provisions the criteria for awarding welfare benefits were rather lax. The majority of those who apply for various forms of welfare support are women, which may point towards the key role of women in decisions concerning household budgets and seeking alternative forms of support (which should be seen as a contradiction of the traditional division of roles in Silesian families). In addition, women statistically live longer than men, which is reflected in demographic processes. It should also be noted that, in line with the traditional approach to family roles, a considerable number of Siemianowice Śląskie's current senior female residents did not undertake employment, instead devoting themselves to household and family care. With no income from work and insufficient financial means provided by their husbands, they are unable to meet their daily needs. This is all the more relevant given that the elderly who use the services and support provided by the Siemianowice Śląskie Municipal Social Welfare Centre tend to apply for such support mainly owing to difficulties brought about by chronic conditions and limited mobility – which can in turn lead to various problems e.g. with household management – poverty, and social orphanhood.

These days an increasing number of senior citizens remain active throughout their lives, which is reflected in the various forms of sport activities they undertake, their participation in activities organised by so-called Universities of the Third Age, and in their membership in numerous associations and social initiatives. These findings corroborate the main points of George Maddox's activity theory (Turner, Helms 1999), which states that older adults prefer to maintain the same or a similar level of activity as they did during their period of professional engagement. The sources of happiness and personal satisfaction for people in this age group are participation in social life and a demonstrated ability to adjust to changing life conditions and new situations.

An increasing number of elderly people aim to maintain their level of activity in its various forms. In addition to those offered by the social welfare system, a large percentage of the elderly seek areas of activity which could give them both satisfaction and a feeling of being useful to others.

These areas of activity may be related to the specific areas of social policy identified by Julian Aulaytner (2000). When reviewing these nine, or even ten – as proposed by Krzysztof Czekaj (Czekaj 2012) – particular policies, it should be noted that most of them offer various forms of activity, which the elderly may be willing to accept (Czekaj, Bartoszek, Faliszek, Niesporek, Trawkowska 2012, Szukalski 2012).

The first of these, namely population and family policy, is essentially an area with very few, if any, possibilities for the elderly. Still, there have been a few cases of marriages contracted by persons aged 70 and older. Decisions of this kind show how the elderly seek to give a feeling of security to their partners and take various steps aimed at avoiding solitude.

The second policy is concerned with employment, salary, working conditions and work stability. There is a good reason to refer to this policy, even though one should not forget that the senior citizens in question are those who, according to Labour Law provisions, have withdrawn from professional life. Therefore, social productivity should be seen as 'any activity, which produces goods and services, whether remunerated or not, such as household jobs, childcare, voluntary involvement, and support provided to family and friends. Needless to say, social productivity cannot be unequivocally identified with professional engagement. Even so, it undoubtedly constitutes an important domain of the every day life of the elderly. Social productivity frequently allows one to feel needed and useful, which means that senior adults readily become involved in a variety of activities organised by groups of volunteers or numerous associations (Auleytner 2000).

Housing policy is third on the list of particular social policies. Housing conditions and the living environment of the elderly are two fundamentally important aspects which affect their daily existence. These are, on the one hand, social aspects of elderly people's functioning in society – i.e. their familiarity with the space of their housing estate, district, town or city as well as the social bonds which have been established over the many

years they have resided in one particular location. On the other hand, it concerns being independent in one's own living space and the feeling of security that results from it. Each person should function in his or her social environment for as long as possible, in a way that guarantees maximum independence and self-reliance. In this respect, senior citizens may be offered protected living premises, which on the one hand would provide intimacy, independence and security and, on the other, the support and assistance of professional social welfare services. Undoubtedly, such an approach constitutes a considerable challenge for social services as well as, if not primarily, for the local government.

Healthcare policy affects the elderly to a great extent, which is connected not only with ailments and conditions typical of older and old age, but also with counteractive strategies. Medical developments, including increasingly efficient forms of therapy, can be juxtaposed with prevention. An active lifestyle may significantly help the elderly maintain their independence and delay the effects of ageing, consequently improving their quality of life. This explains why numerous community schemes encouraging physical activity and active lifestyle target the elderly community. Alongside prophylaxis, it is essential that the senior community be protected as regards access to the network of specialised healthcare centres, including geriatric facilities.

The fifth social policy concerns education, which is another area offering certain opportunities for older adults. So-called Universities of the Third Age provide various opportunities for learning and knowledge expansion at a reasonable cost, which is of significant importance as the elderly normally live on limited budgets. Such initiatives create favourable conditions for establishing new contacts and building interpersonal relations, as is the case with policy concerning culture.

Furthermore, social welfare and security policy should be mentioned, as it is undoubtedly the area which most affects the elderly. As regards social security, the elderly receive pensions under current pension schemes, which are, however, clearly insufficient. Consequently, a significant proportion of senior citizens become dependent on the social welfare system. The system of social welfare and support offers various forms of assistance. These are mainly financial benefits, which augment the low payments received under the social security scheme. It should be noted that besides financial benefits paid to the elderly, the social support system provides a large variety of activities aimed at promoting an active lifestyle in this age group. An example of such an initiative are day care centres, which aim to encourage active lifestyle through a number of activities, including occupational therapy workshops. Other forms of support available for the elderly are nursing homes, which provide on-going assistance, the above-mentioned protected flats, and any other schemes geared towards encouraging independence and mobility among older adults.

As regards public security policy, there is a growing need for schemes aiming to organise local communities – especially the elderly community – along a common goal,

which should be the provision of security for this particular social group and the prevention of various risks through a range of activities, including assistance, self-help and neighbourhood support.

The last area of social policy to be mentioned is the state of civil society. The ability of a society in general, and various social groups (including senior citizens) in particular, to organise themselves around problems which affect them and attempts at resolving said problems, is a clear indication of the development of true democracy. A democratic society is aware of various threats to security (among other things), which can be prevented within the framework of local organisations and self-organisation. At a time when societies, including the community of Siemianowice Śląskie, are ageing, one can observe an urgent need for programmes and schemes that allow the elderly to remain independent and self-reliant for as long as possible. Thus, local policy towards the elderly community and old age in general should aim far beyond healthcare and social welfare. The findings presented above clearly indicate that the needs of senior citizens are much greater, as is their social capital.

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