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Aging of Society and in Society

ABSTRACT: Attention in the article is focused on the basic concepts in the gerontological sense, namely: aging, old age and elderly people. The in-depth analysis concerned three areas of issues: aging of society, aging in society and proposals of preparation for old age. Aging is a process that affects everyone and should be prevented. Demanding and even challenging older people is one of the methods.

KEYWORDS: aging, old age, elderly people, preparation for old age

Introduction

The famous Austrian gerontologist Leopold Rosenmayr claimed that if all the people who in the history of all mankind have reached the age of 65 or more are treated as 100%, then half of them lived during the previous 40 000 years, and the other 50% are people living today. Over 4500 years, from the Bronze Age to 1900, life expectancy increased by 27 years, and from 1900 to 1990 by another 27 years (Rosenmayr 1999).

Looking back to the past, we can see that there have never been as many elderly people in human history as there are today, and it should also be noted that there has never been such a rapid growth in the cohort of people in late old age, people who, by necessity and in particular, may need help and care. This situation also means that there have never been so many grandmothers and grandfathers enjoying good health for many years, who are irreplaceable capital when it comes to supporting, helping and caring for their descendants. It also means that never before have so many elderly adults had living parents,

i.e. the possibility of relying on a strongly structured family in crisis situations (unemployment, divorces, upbringing problems) (Halicki 2000, p. 275).

Not so long ago, at the end of the 1990s, elderly people were seen in terms of care rather than as „socialized subjects”. Brunon Synak aptly reflected this situation, describing the place of older people in the Polish society as a specific social niche – a significant part of the older generation lives on the sidelines of the mainstream of social life (Synak 2001, p. 52–53). At the beginning of the new century, i.e. in the 21st century, did the situation of older people in Poland change for the better? Are elderly people in Poland still perceived as unsocialized and dependent? It should be noted that the passivity of the elderly and their long-established demanding attitudes used to create a barrier to undertaking and developing new initiatives. At the beginning of this century, the implementation of the idea of lifelong learning on a larger scale meant that the possibilities of older people, their experience and life wisdom were used to a much greater extent than before.

The increase in the percentage of elderly people, i.e. those aged 60 or more in the society, causes that old age treated as the last stage of human life may have the character of a normal process, i.e. take a normal course, but it may also take place in a less optimistic manner and take on a pathological form. The risk of unsuccessful aging can affect anyone, but it increases particularly as age progresses. It is important to pay attention to those life problems of the elderly which become painful in old age and which can be remedied. A good way to overcome barriers and even yourself in old age is the will to act. If the longing for cognition, learning and physical and social activity arouses in old age, the risk of marginalization of older people decreases, while life optimism and the sense of satisfaction with life increases. The aim of the article is to present selected problems related to aging and old age, a problem that is important both from the individual and social point of view, a problem that is also important for social sciences, and in particular social pedagogy, which is equipped with instruments to change the social reality for the better of any group, regardless of age.

Looking at old age and aging through the prism of social pedagogy, one would want to say that the representatives of this scientific discipline have a lot to offer in this area, but also a lot to do. Every one of us is affected by aging, the sooner we become aware of this, the easier it will be to get used to old age, the greater will be the satisfaction from the pedagogical work, but also from the utilitarian activities undertaken, not only for ourselves, but also for others regardless of age.

Aging of the society

Aging of the society is a huge challenge for us, all the more difficult because in order to cope with it we cannot refer to the experience of mankind, because such a situation has never happened in the past. In accordance with the procedure for calculating the demographic ratio, i.e. the percentage of older people in the population, reaching the age of 60 or 65 is assumed as the threshold of old age. Assuming the scale of the eminent Polish demographer Edward Roset, Poland reached the threshold of demographic old age in the first half of 1968 (12% of people aged 60 or more). It should be noted here that at that time the rate of growth of the subpopulation of old people was only slightly higher than the rate of growth of the entire population (Szatur-Jaworska 2016, p. 28). In the following years an increase in the percentage of elderly people was observed in Poland, but the breakthrough in the process of aging of our country's population is the second decade of the 21st century, when the share of people aged 60 or more reached the level of over 20%. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the year 2017, when at the end of the year there were over 9 million elderly people, i.e. people aged 60 or more (almost 24%), 1/3 of whom were people aged 60–64, and 18% were people aged 80 or more (Information... 2018, p. 4). Two years earlier, i.e. in 2015, people aged 60 or more constituted a slightly smaller percentage, less than 23%. By citing this data, I would like to draw attention to the progression of the phenomenon of demographic aging of the Polish society, which has specific consequences.

According to Piotr Szukalski, „in the population of old people the so-called „double aging” is noticeable - along with the increase in the percentage of old people within this group, the share of very old people aged 80 or more increases” (Szukalski 2002, p. 188). Demographers and researchers of social problems link the current changes in the structure of the population with the consequences of further so-called demographic transitions. According to Zbigniew Woźniak, the first demographic transition was characterized by a decrease in mortality as a result of the development of medicine and progress in medical sciences, as well as by the flourish of the institution of family which fulfilled its social roles. On the other hand, the second demographic transition is characterized by a decrease in fertility, a decrease in mortality, longer life expectancy, increased migration, non-formalized relationships. The first demographic transition called the altruistic transition was dominated by the care for family and offspring, while in the second transition, referred to as individualist, the individual's right to self-fulfillment was decisive. It is worth

noting that the upcoming third demographic transition related to international migrations, which affect the structure of population in particular countries and regions of the world, is also mentioned (Woźniak 2016, p. 21).

In the population of elderly people, women prevail – they account for almost 59%, which is primarily related to the excess mortality rate of men. As far as the living environment is concerned, elderly people in cities account for about 25% of the population, while in rural areas the number is lower - about 20%. Another important characteristic of the elderly population is marital status. Among people aged 60 or more, 78% of men and only 42% of women live in marriage. Among older people, there is a shift in the death rate towards older age groups. This may indicate an increase in the average life expectancy of the population due to an improvement in their health condition. In 2016 the average life expectancy for men was 73.9 years, whereas for women it was 81.9 years. It should be noted that the average life expectancy of women is 8 years longer than that of men. Compared to 1991, the average life expectancy of men increased in 2016 by 8 years, and in the case of women by almost 7 years. Favorable changes can be observed as far as the average life expectancy in Poland is concerned. In 2016, a male individual at the age of 60 had on average slightly over 19 years ahead of him, while a woman at the age of 60 had over 24.5 years ahead of her (Information... 2017, p. 8–11).

It is impossible not to refer here to demographic forecasts. Expected changes in the number and structure of the population aged 60 or more indicate a deepening of the aging process of the Polish society. According to the results of the population forecast for 2014–2050 – despite an anticipated 4.5 million decrease in the population by 2050, the population aged 60 or more is expected to grow steadily. The population of this age group will increase to 13.7 million by the end of 2050 and will account for more than 40% of the total population. As many as 42% of the urban and 38% of the rural population will be at least 60 years old in 2050. It is worth noting that from 2026 a dynamic increase in the number of people aged 80 or more will be observed, which will result from the entry into old age of a significant group of people born between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the 1960s. The number of people aged 80 or more will double between 2025 and 2040, i.e. from 1.7 million to 3.4 million (Information... 2017, p. 11–14).

Should the demographic data presented above inspire fear? Has God really failed when it comes to old age? Do older people only need care and support? Do they really have nothing more to offer? There are many such questions, and it is more important that thought and reason should accompany words and actions when it comes to the issues raised by elderly people and related to them.

Old age – individual and social approach

When studying the issue of aging in society, we touch upon a complex structure, namely old age and elderly people. Looking historically at this issue, it turns out that from the perspective of the social history of „old age”, this concept is undergoing transformation. In the light of the analyses made by Iwona Młóżniak, it turns out that today the term “old age” is no longer old age, because it does not reflect the spirit of history, today the concept is the same as aging. Another concept is also undergoing transformation: there is no longer an old man, but a senior. In order to be able to grasp the meaning of political, social and cultural changes, one should – in the author’s opinion – learn the history of changes in the concept and its meaning (Młóżniak 2016, p. 63).

In the social sciences today we see „old age first of all as „...a phenomenon of the outside world in many forms. But for each of us who, in our fifties and sixties, begin to realize its various forms and manifestations, old age is above all a personal problem [...] and it is up to me how I will deal with it” (Szczepański 1980, p. 233–234). What do old people themselves think and say about old age? To the question asked to the seniors: when does old age begin? in a nationwide PolSenior research carried out by the Polish Gerontological Society in 2007–2010, seniors in Poland pointed primarily to three basic factors that occur in human life, which change with age and which, in their opinion, are the beginning of old age. These are: increasing health problems (55.9%), progressing dependence on others (49.5%) and feeling of loss of strength and decreasing activity (46.2%). The following positions were taken by: memory problems (27.8%), retirement (16.2%), as well as the time when changes in behavior and appearance occur (12.6%). According to the PolSenior research, seniors try to domesticate old age: the older a person, the more often he/she treats health problems as an immanent feature of this period of life. Changes in external appearance for the oldest respondents are of little importance, and with age progression man adapts to a different organization of life (Halicka, Halicki 2011, p. 18–22).

It is fair to agree that not every person is given the opportunity to age and experience their own old age, so this cannot be regarded as an unnecessary period in life. According to Andrzej Kojder, „If we consider old age – *summa summarum* – to be redundant in life, life should be assessed in the same way. For what is it? A strive to death? Sometimes dramatic, tragic, rapid and premature. Sometimes calm, quiet, preceded by a long old age” (Kojder 2013,

p. 280). The priceless value of life is also conveyed by Brunon Synak, who as a gerontologist (an expert on the problem), an elderly person, a man who, in the situation of an incurable illness, has left us, the living, with a message (a will) that „It is worth living at any price. I am close to the conviction of the French Enlightenment rationalist and skeptic Voltaire that it is better to suffer than to die” (Synak 2014, p. 107).

Old age, if given, is at the same time imposed. And if it is imposed, it is associated with an obligation. Zbigniew Woźniak, writing aptly about old age, perceives it in three categories as a balance sheet, as well as a crisis, but also a triumph of science and technology (in medicine in particular), and for the above reasons it can be perceived as a value, a challenge and/or a task – for some it will be something hoped for, expected, while for others it may turn out to be something unwanted or even dramatic (Woźniak 2016, p. 49).

However, if old age is treated as a relative category, e.g. in the historical, cultural, geographical, legal, economic and religious dimensions, then it is necessary to talk about the obligation in a balanced and cautious way. For who is an old man? Andrzej Kojder poses this question, but he also answers it „...it is the same person as when young, only sewn into slightly damaged, more or less wrinkled skin. The temptations of old age are the same as in youth, only the possibilities of putting them into action and the consequences of succumbing to them change” (Kojder 2013, p. 275).

Older people in the society

It is impossible to talk about old age without a reference to the subject, i.e. the person who is subject to the process of aging and, with it, various changes. A changing man, functioning in the society, becomes an object of shaping views and issuing opinions. Opinions about old age and perception of old age – as we recall the history of old age – from antiquity to renaissance (Minois 1995), from Montaigne to the first pensions (Bois 1996) have changed throughout history, and this continues to this day.

In the period after the Second World War, Brigitte Donicht-Fluck distinguishes five stages of shaping the views on old age and the role of elderly people in the society:

- first stage: deficit and loss of importance (1940s and 1950s);
- second stage: adjustment to the status of a pensioner (1960s);
- third stage: seeking compensatory roles after cessation of professional activity (1970s);
- fourth stage: independent living (1980s);
- fifth stage: self-responsibility (1990s).

This periodization points to the shifting of the main problem from the loss of social value, through adaptation to the role of a pensioner, to full independence of older people and their active participation in social life (Halicka 1995, p. 44).

The educational outlook characteristic of the first stage of thinking about old age as a period associated with multiple loss can be illustrated by an English saying: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks". Old age is treated as a suitable period for fun, traveling or hobbies. The second stage, as a time dominated by thinking about retirement, needs education, the aim of which is to help to deal with the new life situation. In the third stage, the importance of building a realistic, i.e. essentially positive, image of old age is raised, and old people are treated as adults who have only grown old. They do not need separate educational programs. It is only a matter of integrating them into the normal course of classes in existing adult education institutions. In the fourth stage, old age began to be seen as a period of life of particular quality and peculiar potential. On the one hand, education is intended to activate seniors in different areas and at different levels; on the other hand, by treating this stage as a complement to life as well as a period of searching for meaning and taking stock of the past, education is intended to support these processes, making each individual responsible for himself/herself and for his/her own old age. And here we are touching the delicate matter (stage five), where with the beginning of the 1980s the discussion about the self-responsibility in old age began to grow more and more vividly. With the dynamic growth of the elderly population, it was seen as a potential burden on society. As a result, especially "young seniors" are expected, as far as health allows, to be more involved in caring for oneself and in building the well-being of the society with their knowledge and skills. Elderly people are divided into independent (*able elderly*) and those in need of help (*frail elderly*). The image of seniors as an unguessed social capital, a treasure of knowledge and skills that society cannot give up, is promoted. Older people feel the need to be useful to the society (Halicki 2000, p. 14–15).

Human behavior in old age, as in any other phase of biography, must be understood as a relation between the requirements towards individuals and the resources enabling them to meet these requirements. This attitude was the basis for the formulation of a competence theory (Kruse 1987, p. 374), which expresses a more individualized approach. Of course, the requirements for older people, as well as their resources, are not identical to those of younger people. Early adulthood is characterized by „entry events” such as career, partnership, motherhood or fatherhood, while in old age we deal with

„loss events” (departure of children, loss of professional role, death of friends, etc.). Competence is expressed in the interaction between an individual and environmental factors over a given period of time. A specific environment also requires specific competencies. The old days required different competences than today. Therefore, there is no single competence in old age, but different forms of competent behavior, which should be seen depending on the environment and the specific requirements of the time in which one lives (Halicki 2000, p. 12). With regard to older people, competence is the ability of an individual to take responsibility for his/her own life and to shape it independently (Kruse 1987, p. 365).

For some it may seem strange that in late adulthood we are talking about preparing for old age or upbringing for old age. Does this not affect the dignity of an aging person or a very old person? The answer is ‚no’ and is satisfactory, because preparation for old age should start very early and should be treated as an uninterrupted process, as a function of human development.

Preparation for old age

Aleksander Kamiński presented an interesting proposal of actions aimed at maintaining one’s competences and acquiring new ones in his concept of „upbringing for old age”, according to which it is necessary for an old man to adjust to life in modern society, but also for the society to adjust to the growing number of old people in it. It is a concept that takes into account both individual activities and those undertaken by social institutions. According to Kamiński, upbringing for old age is to help people develop their interests and aspirations, as well as skills and habits, which in old age help to implement a lifestyle conducive to prolonging their youth (Kamiński 1993, p. 96).

Kamiński’s concept is a synthesis of the then gerontological knowledge and experience of an artist, which he translated into practical indications. Their implementation should lead to successful aging and a positive life balance. For many years, this concept has been the basis in Poland for reflections on how to adapt to old age. In social pedagogy it was the first theoretical concept of upbringing for old age, covering the whole human life, and not only the retirement period.

Preparation for old age is understood in a similar way by Piotr Szukalski, according to whom it is necessary to prepare for old age. On the one hand, it is an individual action taken with a view to improving one’s life situation in old age, and on the other hand, it is a macro-social action aimed at meeting the needs of the society, including those of the elderly. In P. Szukalski’s opinion,

preparation for old age involves undertaking activities in several important areas: economic, health, relational, spatial, technological-educational and political. The indicated actions aimed at preparing for a more satisfactory old age do not exhaust the analyzed issue. The author's intention was to indicate the essence of the idea of the preparation of individuals and the community for old age (Szukalski 2009, p. 43–53).

Zofia Szarota, in her thinking about aging and old age, went one step further. She supplemented the concept of „upbringing for old age” formulated by A. Kamiński by a proposal of actions aimed at „upbringing in old age” and „upbringing through old age”. Admittedly, some elements of upbringing in old age were *implicit* in A. Kamiński's proposal, but Z. Szarota distinguished the matter and provided contemporary commentaries on the subject. A completely new proposal is upbringing through old age. Old age is understood here as an educational situation, i.e. a general order of things which influences human behavior and introduces permanent changes in this behavior (Szarota 2010, p. 135–144).

Interesting reflections related to old age, otherwise known as late adulthood, are suggested by Beata Bugajska, who believes that if older people have the courage to live in spite of limitations, then adolescents will not be afraid to look for their own identity. Thus, based on the extended Erikson's concept of psychosocial development of man, she creates the geragogy of courage (Bugajska 2017, p. 1095–1102). The author believes that when talking about education for old age and education in old age, one often does not notice the dynamics of this period of life. This may indicate some doubts among educators as to whether it makes sense to invest in the education of the elderly. On the other hand, „thanks to the courage to live in old age, in a world where youth is on a pedestal, it will be easier for the elderly to cope with the second crisis of late adulthood, integrity – despair, and it will be easier for the younger generations to appreciate the wisdom of the last phase of life, as well as to look more courageously to the future” (Bugajska 2015, p. 99).

Preparation for old age involves requirements and even challenges. An old Greek proverb says that good education is a means of education for youth, consolation for old age, wealth for the poor, and decoration for the rich. The term education is an unclear pedagogical category, especially in the area of teaching and upbringing. Małgorzata Halicka and Jerzy Halicki, based on Max Weber's concept, set a number of requirements for older people: learning requirements determined by historical time, learning requirements determined by calendar age, and learning requirements determined by individual fate and critical life events. Assistance in education of the elderly, which has become

a challenge for educational gerontology due to the emergence of critical life events and burdensome situations in older people's lives, is possible and works well in the situation of individual counseling and teaching, and in the intervention approach requires the cooperation of specialists (Halicka, Halicki 2013, p. 309–316).

Leon Dyczewski, in turn, talks about the challenges that old age brings. These are: the challenge of spiritual youth and sustained activity, the challenge to find oneself, the challenge of loneliness and the challenge of the transcendent world. „Seeing old age with new challenges, combining it with learning, experiencing and achieving something new and valuable helps to go through it with dignity” (Dyczewski 2013, p. 290).

In scientific narratives – especially in recent years – there are many statements – also by young people – imbued with concern for old people but concerned about the lack of effective policies on aging and old age. The substantive involvement of many competent gerontologists in the problem of aging and old age is very pleasing, while the phenomenon of budding of „scientific experts” on aging and old age among the representatives of the older generation, who had never been associated with gerontology before with their research, is sad and frightening. A lesser evil is that they publish articles with theses that have long been well known to professionals. However, their teaching of young gerontological staff poses a threat to science. Excellent Polish geragologist Olga Czerniawska noticed this problem much earlier. It resounded at almost every scientific meeting: today everyone is a specialist in gerontology, everyone knows all about it. I hope that the Act 2.0, implemented in 2018, will make it possible to identify persons who are equipped with scientific competence in particular disciplines.

Final thoughts

Today, active aging is the subject of political discourse and symbolic elites. This does not negate the experience of aging people, but – probably over the course of several generations – it will force them into different frames and give them a different social sense (Młodziak 2016, p. 63). One can agree with the author in this respect, but with one reservation. In some respects, the situation will not change. In almost every country that has crossed the demographic aging threshold, older people are a stable electorate of various political parties. It seems unlikely that a sensible political party will give up striving for the support of this social group in local or parliamentary elections. Older people are a substantial capital in the elections, which in the

future will be even more powerful because it will be a significant electorate in quantitative terms, as well as even more valuable in terms of education and social commitment. Thus, politicians' ignoring the problems and needs of the elderly, and at the same time using them only in campaigns for political purposes, is – as Zbigniew Woźniak put it – political sinfulness for which their loved ones will also repent.

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