

Błachnio Aleksandra*

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

Subjective perception of the life-course in old age and in youth

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the results of the perceived age norms of the life-course. Several such studies were described in literature. The research project of Perrig-Chiello and Perren (2005) inspired the author to replicate some of the used measures in a different cultural context. Polish women from early and late adulthood were interviewed on timing biographical transitions and well-being.

Tested hypothesis claimed that timing is related to age. The second hypothesis assumed connection between well-being and age.

The comparison of the results of senior women and young women proved different timing of 11 biographical transitions. However their subjective perception and evaluation of life-course was comparable. There were only 5 significant differences in emotional valence of transitions: end of school education, being single, birth of second child, grandparenthood, and retirement given by senior and young women. The achieved results proved the moderately positive life satisfaction both of senior women and young women.

Keywords: developmental deadlines, ageing, biographical transitions, well-being

■ Introduction

Nowadays, one can notice considerable demographic changes in the structure of the societies that lead to the increase of the senior citizens' participation in everyday life (Stuart-Hamilton, 2000; Steuden, 2011; Błachnio, 2012). The currently formulated forecasts predicting the unavoidable domination of the elderly may cause panic among quite a few people. Its roots

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aleksandra Błachnio, e-mail: aleksandra.blachnio@gmail.com.

particularly lay in economic crises as well as in justified fears of the governing politicians and experts about the lack of the ability of social welfare and health services to respond to the real requirements of aging societies. Despite large-scale educational pro-age campaigns, the old age is still stigmatized and it faces social ignorance expressed by the lack of knowledge on the old age and the process of ageing (Błachnio, 2011; Błachnio, Buliński 2013a). Still too many individuals present the ageist judgments and actions. And seniors too often experience economic, cultural, and social marginalization. As a consequence only few of them decide to “to be active agers who often, daily, have to fight against conventions, bureaucracy, families, and health professionals for that right” (Wilcock, 2007, p.15). The only way to prevent ageist practices is an honest discovery of facts about lives and functioning of the elderly (Błachnio, Buliński 2013b).

The issue of the quality of life in the old age is particularly important in those deliberations. Literature presents extensive evidence that senior citizens' self-assessment of the quality of life very often is satisfactory and positive. The author of this article, in the course of her standing research, has been popularizing the adequate knowledge on aging including also the concept of positive aging. The research conducted with the use of the *Fragebogen zur Lebenszufriedenheit* (FLZ, The Life Satisfaction Questionnaire) in particular revealed that elderly persons evaluated their own functioning as satisfying, both on the whole and in more specific spheres of existence (Błachnio, 2011, 2012). Comparing those results with the results of Czapiński and Panek's research revealed a stable tendency in relatively positive attitude of persons over 60 years old towards their own health, sexual life, social life, life achievements, financial situation, life conditions, and their spare time (Błachnio, Śmiatacz, 2013). Seniors' satisfaction with their own lives may be the result of their emotional maturity and increased self-awareness, life experience, their gained ability to distance themselves from the outer-world, and their realistic approach to life.

Still increasing knowledge on how positively senior citizens experience their own old age, particularly in its first stage, motivates geriatrists and gerontopsychologists towards a discussion on the validity of the revision of the age brackets that define the last stage of human life. If persons in their sixties, and frequently their seventies, preserve their fitness, maintain their functional efficiency and autonomy at satisfactory levels, and remain selves-dependent members of the society, then perhaps the claim to move the starting point of the old age few years further is perfectly legitimate? This question, in the context of still increasing human longevity and growing the average life span, is

not ungrounded. The observation reveals that the old age occupies over 1/3 of an individual's lifetime. All remaining periods – childhood, adolescence, early and middle adulthood – spread over the remaining 2/3 of one's life. The moratorium of the old age, then, rises as a new and attractive quality for the scholars and researchers dealing with the issues of ageing. An aspect that remains equally important is dealing with still popular belief that senior citizens and the young are two utterly incompatible qualities.

Generally, the subjective perception of the life experienced by the old generations and the one lived by the young is diverse and matchless. This assumption of a generation gap, exaggerated and fairly inaccurate when compared with the actual state of affairs, serves as the content and fuel for numerous clichés, stereotypes, and age prejudices. Meanwhile, available and valid empirical results prove that the basic structure of human biography is stable and, for majority of people, comparable (Perrig-Chiello, Perren, 2005). This community of individual experiences can develop better understanding and improve communication between the old and the young. Hence, it is worth to discuss a subjective perception of the course of life with reference to the results of empirical research on biographical transitions and developmental deadlines of the old and the young. The measurement was conducted following the rules previously employed by Pasqualin Perrig-Chiello and Sonja Perren in their research (2005). The obtained results and their discussion constitute the core of this article.

■ Developmental deadlines and biographical transitions

Individual lives consist of the series of developmental tasks that, according to normative approach in life-span psychology, have their own deadlines. Their accomplishment leads to biographical transitions. Depending on the way people experience them it may influence their life adjustment and well-being (Perrig-Chiello, Perren, 2005).

However the recent global socio-cultural changes, including the common personal access to the Internet, the increase of economic mobility and the expanding access to cultural diversity, challenge the eligibility of the standardized life course in human development. The individuals receive numerous opportunities and resources to shape and reshape their life-paths. Although they remain socially dependant, their lives become more idiosyncratic. An

average person gains the increasing number of possible alternatives of human life courses along with increasing diversity of possible roles, relationships and resources easily available to him. In literature this phenomenon is described by the concepts of a pluralisation of life-styles, or de-institutionalization of the life course (Perrig-Chiello, Perren, 2005). It arises a new question if the modern society is age-irrelevant. The researchers wonder if the age norms are relevant and if there are any consequences of missing a developmental deadline.

The relevance of developmental deadlines and biographical transitions is questioned because the life situation of old and young adults change. In case of seniors citizens, their socio-cultural adjustment increases. The innovative technology, especially the Internet, improves the developmental environments of the senior citizens who no longer need to be lonely, excluded and marginalised. Even their biological constraints can be lessened thanks to scientific advances, medical and pharmaceutical development. The young adults also take advantage of the progress of civilisation. They are less determined by local developmental ecology, they choose being global and mobile that results in even further pluralisation of their life-styles. This is because their individual choices of developmental pathways, and their decisions which of developmental deadlines follow and from which disengage do not result in social rejection (Wrosch, Heckhausen, 2005).

This “new reality” enhances to plan studies to investigate the life-course timing. The study, described below, integrates the interest in the structure of biographies of women in early and late adulthood along with the measure of their well-being.

■ Tools and methods

The present study was partly a replication of the work of Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello and Sonja Perren (2005). It was designed to test a hypothesis about differences in timing of experienced biographical transitions among old and young female adults in Poland. The further analysis concerned the seniors' and youth's well-being.

In order to measure timing of experienced and anticipated transitions, the interview was used. It contained a list of age-normed and non-normed transitions over the whole life-span (like for example: first employment, first love, leaving home, marriage, grandparenthood, death of parents, retirement)

that had been developed on the basis of the analogue tool of Pasqualina Perig-Chiello and Sonja Peren (2005). The participants were asked to indicate the age at which the particular event happened and/or was to happen. Then, they were to indicate the emotional evaluation of each event (they used 5-point-scale: 1=very negative; 2=negative; 3=neutral; 4=positive; 5=very positive).

The respondents were also asked to fill one short questionnaire: the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, Griffin – Polish version adapted by Juczyński, 2001). It contains five items to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction. Respondents judge and evaluate – using a 7-point scale that ranges from 7 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree – how much they agree or disagree with each of the 5 items.

Statistical analyses were performed using STATISTICA version 9.0.

■ Study participants and procedure

The sample included 130 women who were all research volunteers recruited through word of mouth. The participants belonged to two age groups: (1) senior women (N=65) – aged 65–75-years old (M=68,75, SD=3,64), (2) young women (N=65) – aged 25–35-years old (M=28,82, SD=3,84). These two distinct age-groups were chosen intentionally to gather data on their functioning and well-being that contend against the existing age stereotypes and prejudices. The participants were tested individually. Firstly they gave an interview on timing of their biographical transitions. Then they completed *the Satisfaction with Life Scale*.

■ Results

The comparison of the results of two age-groups (young women and senior women) proved different timing of developmental deadlines and biographical transitions. To evaluate the significance of the obtained differences of the mean scores, the analysis of variance was run. A significant group effect was found for eleven transitions. All are presented in Table 1. Just to indicate some interesting results – senior women experienced: end of school education, marriage, birth of children, and grandparenthood at an earlier age than young women. Moreover their professional functioning also differ

significantly in comparison to younger generation. What should be stressed is the difference in timing of financial success. Young women anticipated it sooner, on average 4,8 years earlier than the senior women's age when they experienced financial success. Interestingly no significant difference occurred in timing of being old.

Table 1. Results of timing of developmental deadlines and biographical transitions by age

Developmental deadlines and biographical transitions (experienced or anticipated)	M (SD)				F	p
	Female (65-75)	N	Female (25-35)	N		
End of school education	18,9 (3,8)	64	26,2 (13,9)	65	16,85	<.01
First time sex	19,9 (2,1)	64	19,3 (3,5)	65	0,99	
Leaving home	22,4 (5,7)	61	22,7 (4,1)	63	0,09	
Job entry	18,9 (3,6)	64	20,8 (2,5)	65	11,27	<.01
Financial self-reliance	20,7 (4,3)	65	22,4 (3,2)	64	5,93	<.05
Financial success	34,7 (11,4)	59	29,9 (7,0)	60	7,38	<.01
First love	17,4 (3,7)	65	16,7 (3,6)	63	1,51	
Marriage	21,2 (2,6)	62	27,4 (4,2)	58	91,65	<.01
Birth of first child	22,6 (2,9)	62	27,7 (3,9)	58	63,54	<.01
Birth of second child	24,7 (2,7)	63	27,8 (3,1)	58	33,45	<.01
Launching first child	42,1 (9,2)	61	45,2 (11,5)	56	2,65	
Launching last child	47,9 (11,9)	56	50,5 (12,5)	53	1,21	
Job loss or job change	34,3 (12,9)	54	27,4 (7,4)	58	11,99	<.01
Divorce	49 (24,9)	28	41,4 (13,8)	32	2,16	
Grandparenthood	48,6 (5,8)	62	53,9 (5,9)	58	24,72	<.01
Frailty of parents	47,7 (10,2)	57	47,3 (12,2)	56	0,04	
Death of parent	45,9 (16,2)	62	52,7 (19,6)	49	4,06	<.05
Retirement	57,9 (4,0)	64	65,1 (4,5)	63	91,37	<.01
BEING OLD	72,3 (8,9)	64	71 (12,5)	65	0,48	

The further analysis concerned the emotional valence of developmental deadlines and biographical transitions experienced or anticipated by women. In general, their subjective perception and evaluation of life-course was comparable. There were only 5 significant differences in emotional valence of transitions: end of school education, being single, birth of second child, grandparenthood, and retirement given by senior and young women. The observed variance was in accordance to socio-cultural evolutionary changes in family structures and personal growth.

Table 2. Emotional valence of developmental deadlines and biographical transitions by age

Developmental deadlines and biographical transitions (experienced or anticipated)	M (SD)				F	p
	Female (65-75)	N	Female (25-35)	N		
End of school education	3,5 (0,97)	65	3,9 (0,83)	65	7,95	<.01
First time sex	3,7 (0,82)	64	3,6 (0,82)	65	0,01	
Leaving home	3,8 (2,57)	65	3,7 (0,78)	65	0,05	
Job entry	3,9 (2,0)	65	3,8 (0,81)	65	0,47	
Financial self-reliance	4,3 (2,12)	64	3,8 (0,96)	65	2,95	
Financial success	4,8 (5,8)	64	3,8 (1,1)	65	1,83	
First love	4,5 (2,12)	65	4,2 (0,73)	65	1,1	
Marriage	3,8 (0,99)	65	3,8 (0,94)	64	0,03	
Being single	2,3 (1,12)	53	3,3 (0,81)	55	18,22	<.01
Birth of first child	4,2 (0,83)	65	4,1 (0,88)	64	1,26	
Birth of second child	4,1 (0,83)	63	3,8 (0,89)	62	5,21	<.05
Launching first child	3,5 (0,91)	63	3,4 (0,93)	61	0,97	
Launching last child	3,5 (0,87)	64	3,3 (0,91)	58	3,19	
Job loss	3,1 (0,99)	61	3,3 (1,02)	63	1,68	
Divorce	2,2 (1,36)	46	2,1 (1,17)	52	0,30	
Grandparenthood	4,4 (0,7)	64	3,9 (0,67)	64	13,89	<.01
Frailty of parents	3,3 (0,95)	64	3,2 (0,99)	64	0,07	
Death of parent	1,4 (0,79)	63	1,5 (0,83)	57	0,41	
Retirement	3,8 (0,89)	65	3,0 (1,15)	65	18,05	<.01
BEING OLD	2,6 (1,1)	64	2,5 (0,95)	65	0,31	

The conducted study also covered the measurement of life satisfaction (Table 3). In comparison to Juczyński's normative sample (N=555, adults aged 20-55; Juczyński, 2005), the achieved results were average and proved the moderately positive life satisfaction both of senior women and young women. Further the analysis showed no significant age differences.

Table 3. Results of Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

	Mean	SD	T test	p
Senior women	20,98	5,41	-0,128	0,89
Young women	20,86	5,56		

■ Discussion and conclusions

Globalisation has great impact on life of an average man. It changes the ecological environment where he lives and gives him broader access to wider range of resources. His possible choices are multiplied, the accessible opportunities seem to be countless, and thus the process of self-development is even more intricate and demanding. "Biological clock" and social timetables, that used to be natural constraints of human development (Salmela-Aro, 2009), are compensated, rescaled and even overcome by the advances of technology. For instance, fertility and motherhood have been prolonged by the pharmacological treatment and in-vitro fertilization technique. Thus aspiration and goals of educational and occupational trajectories can be successfully accomplished and it does not eliminate starting a family at a later age.

People adjust to accelerating world, and redefine their own identity. Katariina Salmela-Aro (2009) states their socialization and self-development become further individualized. However the pluralisation of life-styles implies no radical rejection of developmental pathways. The data, presented in this article, prove that the structure of biographies of women in early and late adulthood is still consistent. The key life tasks preserve their advantage. Women still are prone to be "mothers, lovers, wives and successful professionals". However, the traditional course of life transitions, reported by senior women, has been modified in timing by young women. The differences prove that younger generation redirect their own development more to educational and occupational trajectories. But even if they focus on challenges, demands and opportunities encountered in work, they still want to enter into parenthood. Young women – despite of their stronger positive valence of singlehood in comparison to senior women – scored high the emotional valence of giving birth to first child, and then the second one.

The average of life satisfaction in both age-groups prove that they are mostly satisfied with most areas of their lives. This result is especially interesting because it shows that both periods of life: late and early adulthood although so different are not contradictory. At both stages of their lives people confront obstacles, compensate for failures, and encounter challenges and opportunities. Even approach to ageing is shared by senior and young women. Respondents evaluated it moderately negatively and their mean scores do not differ significantly.

The presented results, although preliminary, prove some interesting human development trends that should be further studied. The exceeding

tendency to change, and the observed diversification, pluralisation and individualisation of lives may prolong activity and growth, and sustain the positive experience of ageing.

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