

Suggested Citation: Błachnio, A. & Fabis, A. (2018). Satisfaction paradox in old age. In Tomczyk, Ł., Ryk, A. & Prokop, J. (Eds.). *New trends and research challenges in pedagogy and andragogy*. Kraków: Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny w Krakowie. DOI 10.24917/9788394156893.14

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SATISFACTION PARADOX IN OLD AGE

Abstract: Demographic ageing is a phenomenon noticed in many societies, but its dynamics and characteristics are different. This paper presents results of research on life satisfaction in old age among Polish citizens, in the perspective of positive ageing. Obtained average value of wellbeing of Polish seniors fits within the window most representative for societies of economically developed countries. According to Ed Diener, this value expresses the level of general life satisfaction, with openness to change in single areas of one's activity. Educational background and marital status have statistically significant impact on general life satisfaction among seniors, whereas age and gender did not matter much. Place of residence was important for seniors' wellbeing.

Keywords: ageing, quality of life, wellbeing, satisfaction paradox; age (un)friendly environment

INTRODUCTION

Population ageing continues, and its consequences substantially change functioning of individuals and whole societies. Demographic revolution of silver populations reveals new research problems in a wide and interdisciplinary area of gerosciences. Last decades brought introduction and popularisation of model of positive, successful and good ageing and old age (Bowling, 2007; Hill, 2009; Błachnio, 2017). It is a counterbalance for pessimistic forecasts about regularly increasing percentage of people with disabilities in the global society; a group seen only as generating constantly growing economical and social costs because of support and care they require. Fear of disability and dependence in old age was confirmed by many results of research on health-related quality of life (HQOL). They showed that with age, life satisfaction decreases due to multimorbidity, polipharmacy, growing dependence and limited mobility.

Further studies on life quality in old age confirmed that health is an important area and its importance grows in late adulthood when human body gets older and weaker (Halicka 2004). With age, people suffer from more and more ailments and chronic diseases. Epidemiological data show that more than half of people over 60 is treated with three or more chronic diseases (Michałkiewicz, Wróbel, 2012; Gryglewska, 2013; Piotrowicz, 2013). Diseases and health status are not indifferent factors in individual evaluation of life satisfaction among seniors (Błachnio, Maliszewski, Molesztak, 2017; Ziółkowski, Błachnio, Pąchalska, 2015). However, relation between health and evaluation of life quality of ageing persons is not based solely on a simple correlation. It is true that often declining health means lower quality of life, and improved health leads to increased life quality, but these are not all possible patterns. Based on empirical evidence, subject literature shows the so called satisfaction paradox — very positive subjective assessment of life quality in situations where objective health indicators are unfavourable (Heszen-Niejodek, 1996; Whitley, Popham, Benzeval, 2016).

Theses about environmental impact on functioning and wellbeing of seniors also appear in discussion about quality of ageing (Błachnio, 2014; Błachnio, Maliszewski, 2014). There is a tendency to lower the level of life satisfaction among Poles (Trempała, 2014). In individual assessment, theses results that are not a canon in research practice, become the basis for geopolitical and economic divisions of the world. This, in turn, deprives certain societies of chance for positive ageing (Coleman, O'Hanlon, 2017). This problem affects Polish seniors in particular. It motivated the authors of this paper to take part in discussion on the nature of old age and chances our society has for successful ageing.

OLD AGE IN POLAND AND SATISFACTION

Statements about “two speeds” of ageing in Europe and in the world, that can be found in global literature, are shocking. Assigning Polish society into the category in which chances for successful ageing are lesser because of geographical location, is surprising. In science, emotional arguments do not convince as much as numbers. They may be a base for further qualitative research aimed at deepening and extending the research question of how do old people understand and experience their own successful ageing. Thus, the objective of the research and analyses was to verify to what extent successful ageing strategy describes ageing Poles.

In gerontology, life satisfaction is connected with the category of successful ageing, as shown in classic publications by Bernice L. Neugarten, George C. Williams, Robert James Havighurst or Hans Thomae (Halicki, 2010). This practice has been kept till today, and life satisfaction is considered a herald, an identifier or a feature of successful ageing (Halicki, 2010). Therefore, authors' intention was to study the way Polish seniors evaluate their own life satisfaction in subsequent decades of old age. Also, the authors tried more thoughtfully and critically to identify factors that affect wellbeing during ageing and in old age. Their analyses covered individual (gender, education, marital status) and environmental (place of residence) variables.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study included 731 persons of whom 379 were women (52%) and 352 men (48%). Sampling criteria were the following: age of 60 and more, Polish citizenship, no diseases that could cause death within next 6 months, no significant cognitive disorders. The youngest respondent was 60 and the oldest 95 (mean age 74.60, SD 7.44). The sample was selected by means of snowball method in the following administrative regions (Polish *voivodships*): kujawsko-pomorskie, wielkopolskie, mazowieckie, warmińsko-mazurskie, pomorskie, lubelskie and śląskie. The detailed description of sample demographic variables is presented in Table 1. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and tested individually.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

	Men (n=352)	Women (n=379)
Age (average, standard deviation)	74.72 (7.41)	74.49 (7.47)
Marital status (n, %)		
Married	246 (70%)	172 (45%)
Widowed	82 (23%)	171 (45%)
Divorced	16 (5%)	24 (7%)
Single	8 (2%)	12 (3%)
Education (n, %)		
Elementary	92 (26%)	133 (35%)
Vocational	105 (30%)	71 (19%)
Secondary	96 (27%)	130 (34%)
Higher	59 (17%)	45 (12%)
Place of residence		
Big City	155 (44%)	144 (38%)
Small town	47 (13%)	53 (14%)
Village	150 (43%)	182 (48%)

They completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, Griffin – Polish version adapted by Juczyński, 2001). The questionnaire contained 5 statements to measure global cognitive evaluation of one's life satisfaction. The statements refer to past, presence and future, and are very general. They allow to compare respondent's life with an ideal picture of it, and assess satisfaction from what has been achieved so far.

Each item is evaluated using a 7-point scale that ranges from 7 — strongly agree to 1 — strongly disagree. According to the SWLS, higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction. Each participant gave consent for participation in the study. The Statistica 12.5 software

was used for analyses. For the purpose of statistical analysis, the measure of descriptive statistics, and analysis of variance were used. The level of statistical significance was assumed at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

The main objective was to diagnose wellbeing of Polish seniors. Obtained data enabled evaluation of general life satisfaction among the respondents. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of study sample

	N	Average	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Wellbeing	731	21.534	1.000	35.000	5.943

According to interpretation pattern proposed by Ed Diener (2006), the obtained average value classifies obtained result to average value range (from 20 to 24). This level of life satisfaction is typical for economically developed countries. It includes most people who are generally satisfied but have some areas (one or two) they wish to improve.

In order to identify the sources of life satisfaction of Polish seniors, multiple regression analysis was conducted. Influence of four variables was estimated: gender (women, men), age divided into decades (3 age subgroups were indentified: 60-, 70- and 80-year olds), education (primary, vocational, secondary and higher) and marital status (married, widowed, divorced, single).

Table 3. Multiple regression results – summary

N=731	R= .173 R ² = .030 Corr. R2= .0245 F(4.726)=5.588 p < .00020 Std. error of estimate: 5.869					
	b*	SE with b*	b*	SE with b	t(7a6)	P
Intercept			31.112	45.652	0.682	0.496
Gender	-0.008	0.038	-0.100	0.449	-0.222	0.825
Age (60/70/80+)	0.031	0.039	0.251	0.316	0.794	0.428
Education	0.119	0.038	0.480	0.154	3.109	0.002
Marital status	-0.113	0.040	-0.463	0.164	-2.826	0.005

Out of the analysed regressors, educational background and marital status had statistically significant impact on general life satisfaction of seniors. The value of the coefficient

of multiple determination reveals that percentage variation explained by both variables after eliminating communalities, explains 3% of the total variability.

In the next stage, a series of analyses was conducted, comparing results of respondents in different subgroups. In authors' opinion, particular attention should be given to the results that cover seniors in the subsequent decades of old age — as an attempt to verify the thesis about decreasing level of wellbeing among seniors in less prosperous societies from the former Eastern block (Coleman, O'Hanlon, 2017).

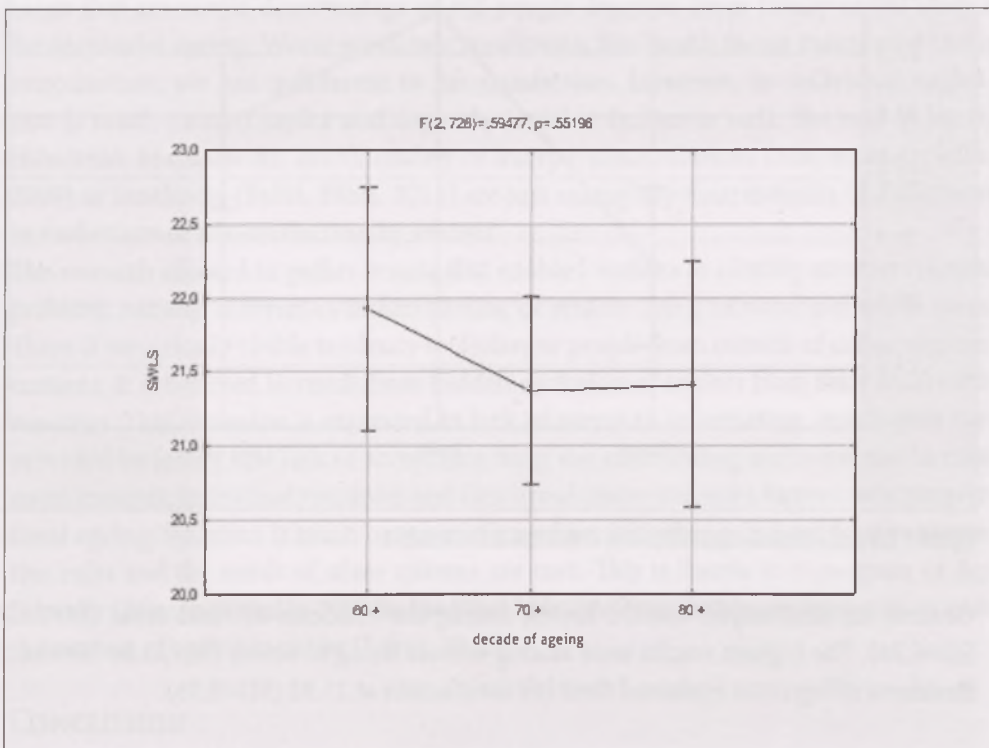


Figure 1. Life satisfaction in subsequent decades of old age

The first subgroup 60+ consisted of 199 respondents. They obtained average value of 21.925 (SD=5.78) on the life satisfaction scale (SWLS). Second subgroup 70+ included 334 respondents. Their life satisfaction is expressed by the average of 21.371 (SD=6.16). The oldest subgroup 80+ consisted of 198 respondents. The average SWLS value in this group was 21.414 (SD 5.738). Minor differences in life satisfaction values are not statistically relevant.

Statistically relevant differences occurred at the level of life satisfaction among people ageing in different environments. The analyses were conducted in three subgroups: residents of rural areas (N=332), towns (N=100) and big cities (N=299). The results are presented in Figure 2.

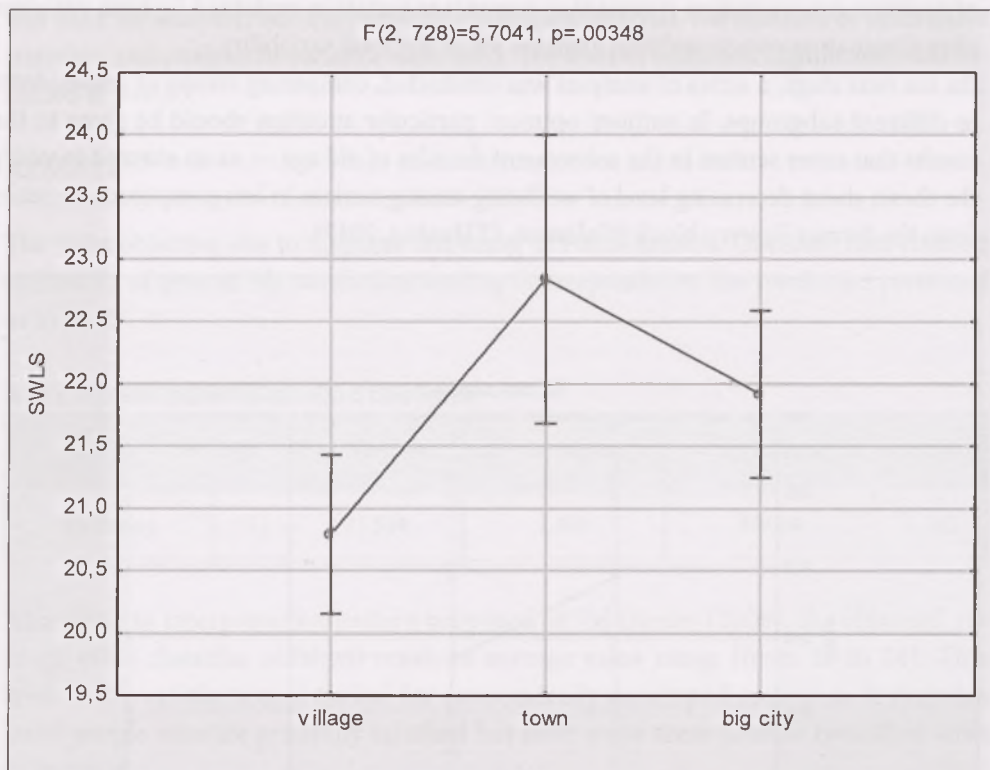


Figure 2. Life satisfaction of respondents living in different environments's

General life satisfaction was the lowest among the residents of rural areas ($M=20.79$ $SD=6.24$). The highest results were among seniors living in towns ($M=22.84$ $SD=5.81$). Residents of big cities evaluated their life satisfaction at 21.92 ($SD=5.55$).

DISCUSSION

Relation between age and wellbeing, and its fluctuation in the course of life is verified in the latest meta-analyses. There is a strongly emphasised fact of increase in wellbeing level after the age of 70. These results were obtained in American and Western European sample groups (Andersen-Ranberg, Petersen, Robine, Christensen, 2005). As for less prosperous societies of Eastern block, an opposite tendency is described — of constant decrease of the level of wellbeing, that begins already in middle age and lasts till advanced old age (Coleman, O'Hanlon, 2017). Research conducted among 731 Polish seniors did not confirm this tendency. Based on a single study, we cannot totally reject the proposed thesis. However, it is a serious argument for conducting further research in order to verify the reliability and accuracy of this assumption. It may lead to many harmful interpretations of old age experience in Poland. It is simplified and may lead to political and economical segregation of Polish society.

The very process of ageing and experiencing old age is diverse, individual and heterogeneous. Experiencing old age is also dynamic in its nature. Therefore, a single factor such as geo-political location, cannot be a key determinant of the range of senior wellbeing. Of course, less prosperous societies, identified as Eastern block, do not have comparable resources in health and social assistance sector, assigned for geriatric patients and ageing citizens. Feminisation and pauperisation of old age in Poland is a painful fact (Szukalski, 2011, 2013; Cudak, 2007; Zrałek, 2014). This does not mean that economic disadvantage of old people deprives them totally of the chance for successful ageing. Worse economic conditions, like health factor mentioned in the introduction, are not indifferent to life satisfaction. However, its individual evaluation is much more complex and depends on other factors as well. The role of family (Błachnio, Maliszewski, 2015), quality of interpersonal relations (Majewska-Opielka, 2009) or loneliness (Fabiś, Fabiś, 2014) are just exemplary determinants of differences in evaluation of life satisfaction by seniors.

The research allowed to gather results that enabled authors to identify another relevant problem, namely, differences in functioning of seniors living in rural and urban areas. There is empirically visible tendency to disfavour people from outside of urban agglomerations. It is believed to result from hidden exclusion of seniors from their local communities. This exclusion is expressed in lack of access to information, insufficient care provided by family and lack of acceptance from the surrounding environment. In rural environments, individual resources and functional ability are main factors favouring optimal ageing. Situation is much better in cities where it is often regulated by administrative rules and the needs of silver citizens are met. This is thanks to a program of Age Friendly Cities, initiated in 2007 by the World Health Organisation, of renewing cities in the context of ageing societies (Labus, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Polish seniors experience their old age in the same way as their peers in economically developed countries. However, place of residence and educational background are still important in determining the quality of own old age and the level of general wellbeing. Presented results regarding life satisfaction among seniors are a clear argument for the heterogeneous nature of old age. Description and generalisation of thereof is difficult due to the dynamics with which it changes under the influence of environment and individual experiences. Thus, quantitative measurement, though important and valuable in denying some dangerous and dividing stereotypes resulting in excluding older people from some societies with limited economical resources (Coleman, O'Hanlon, 2017), is insufficient. It is reasonable to extend the measurements with qualitative research, especially narratives that have become more and more popular in recent years. For practitioners and people functioning with ageing and old persons, it is the evidence and inspiration

that successful ageing is not only a theoretical construct, but is possible for an individual to actually experience it. People need knowledge and skills in obtaining and leveling individual and environmental resources to be able to better manage of own old age.

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