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## **Determinants and dimensions of intellectual activity of the elderly in the context of problems in adjustment to old age**

### Introduction

The lengthening human lifespan is one of modern civilisation achievements. According to forecasts, the amount of older people in the present century is increasing fast and the growth is going to intensify, particularly after 2020. However, the actual force and duration of these changes are not bound to achieve the predicted levels, especially if countries decide to launch appropriate mechanisms within the implemented migration or employment policies. There is no doubt that the observed process of population ageing is continuous, though its dynamics may vary. Consequently, the issues of quality of life in old age have become questions of vital importance for the whole of the society, in particular those about adjustment to that stage of life, including attitudes of the elderly towards old age, behaviour patterns, fears and apprehensions, abilities to function in the changed life situation.

### Problems of adjustment to old age

Proper adjustment to old age allows people to take advantage of its main benefit, i.e. a large amount of free time and, as follows, opportunities to pursue favourite activities or liberating themselves from the necessity of social competition. However, the proper adjustment to old age is not such an easy task for every individual, therefore, if one does not adjust well or even fails to do

that altogether, the person faces feelings of loneliness, frustration, suffering and fears of being dependent on others.<sup>1</sup>

People adopt various attitudes in that respect, mainly negative ones, e.g. the attitudes classification by S.Reichard includes only one positive approach, namely the constructive attitude aiming at the activity for the sake of family and friends and people needing help or support. The remaining approaches within the typology are described as negative and include: dependence, a defensive attitude, hostility towards others and self-directed hostility (self-destruction). Those attitudes, depending on the type, are typical for people demanding care, continuously requiring attention of their family or caretakers, people rejecting assistance of others, reclusive and isolating from the environment. The attitude of hostility towards other people is characteristic of people prone to blame others for their own mistakes, mistrustful and contentious, people that do not accept old age and see only the worst in it. However, the most destructive attitude is self-directed hostility as people adopting this approach are unable to accept their own old age, expect death fearing it at the same time. They are susceptible to depression and perceive themselves as victims of bad fortune, are passive in life, feel useless and lonely.<sup>2</sup>

Typologies of attitudes or behaviour patterns in old age presented by such authors as A. Zych, C.S. Ford or B. Neugarten are similar to the one described above in that they all include mostly negative approaches. The literature and more and more numerous recent studies point to the fact that old people hold numerous fears and apprehensions about their old age, all the more so for the negative image of that stage of life among the Polish society, where the elderly are negatively stereotyped as people in poor health, frail, childish, requiring continuous care and financial support on the part of their families or social security. The old are believed to be grumpy, spiteful, obstinate and unhappy.<sup>3</sup>

Another important issue concerning adjustment to old age is the fact that in modern post-industrial societies, including the Polish one, there are phenomena, processes and mechanisms provoking the rise and accumulation of barriers for social participation of the elderly. The all-Polish research conducted

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<sup>1</sup> Szatur-Jaworska, B., Błędowski, P., Dzięgielewska M., (2006), *Podstawy gerontologii społecznej*, Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR, Warszawa, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Bromley D. B., (1969), *Psychologia starzenia się*, PWN, Warszawa, p. 132–139, cit. by Szatur-Jaworska B., Błędowski, P., Dzięgielewska, M., (2006), *Podstawy gerontologii społecznej*, Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA-JR, Warszawa, p. 59 and Szarota, Z., (2004), *Gerontologia społeczna i oświatowa. Zarys problematyki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej, Kraków, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Szarota, Z., (2004), op. cit., pp. 49–50.

by the Polish Gerontology Society and the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw mentions primarily the feelings of loneliness and deprivation of numerous psychosocial needs experienced by the Polish elders following their retirement. Although the theses and assumptions concerning exclusion of the old have not been wholly substantiated and empirically grounded, still they emphasize the major problem of the complexity of mechanisms of social participation of the elderly resulting largely from Polish culture, from the social structure but also from social personality of the people and their various social origins. Thus, particular attention should be given to the following aspects of the problem: barriers in the labour market, barriers in social contacts other than within the family and the low level of involvement of the old in the local community or in civil institutions.<sup>4</sup> It is recognized that the fact that the elderly in Poland function out of the mainstream of social life results from the culturally conditioned attitude actually characteristic of all age groups of Poles.<sup>5</sup>

Social isolation and the feeling of loneliness of old people make the gap and contrast between the generations even greater, deepen the mutual lack of understanding of needs and aspirations of the other side what finds its reflection in difficulties in communication and mutual acceptance. That situation results also from the huge cultural and civilisation advance generating changeable aspirations and priorities judged by the generations from entirely opposite standpoints of own life experiences gathered at so different times. One of such differences is the way the generations experience knowledge and learning. The prevailing form of learning for the younger is institutionalised and strictly organised. There is constant pressure to climb up the education ladder and master the amount of knowledge specified by norms set for particular school levels. On the other hand, the older generation undertakes educational activity because they are willing to do so and they need it, as a rule irrespectively of any kinds of rankings or competition. Another difference between the generations is connected with an altered model of a family which determines to a large extent the way the surrounding reality is perceived. Nowadays, the importance of an extended family is diminishing, particularly in big cities where young people are working towards independency fulfilling their plans for the future far from their place of residence. That fact results in the decreased significance

<sup>4</sup> Niezabitowski, M., (2007), *Ludzie starsi w perspektywie socjologicznej. Problemy uczestnictwa społecznego*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe "Śląsk", Katowice, pp. 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> Halicki, J., Halicka, M., (2003), *Integracja społeczna i aktywność ludzi starszych*, [in:] B. Synak (ed.), *Polska starość*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk, pp. 200-201.

of knowledge and experience which is handed down to the younger generation by the elderly in their natural family environment.<sup>6</sup>

The problems of adjusting to old age are among major issues concerning functioning of the modern society. The continuing process of ageing of societies implies not only reflection but also launch of extensive actions allowing the old active and, if possible, independent functioning within the society. Thus, the idea of initiating, supporting and organising various forms of activity among senior citizens should be one of the most significant challenges for the modern civilisation.

### Importance of undertaking activity by the elderly

Definitions of human activity vary depending on the theory; however, it can be generally understood as the way people communicate with others and with the surrounding world. In the context of adjusting to old age, activity becomes an issue of unique relevance as it is a precondition for satisfying own biological, social and cultural needs, and at the same time for assuming social roles, functioning within a group and in the society.<sup>7</sup>

While considering the problem of older people's activity one should refer to main theories that, while analysing factors of human ageing, at the same time point to possibilities and ways of adjusting to that stage of life. The activity theory, counted among the most widely known concepts concerning ageing, can be seen as the most important among them.

According to the activity theory the human ageing process is a social phenomenon. Its advocates perceive ageing as an accumulation of tensions linked to the self-image of an individual created as a result of changes in social roles played by the elderly so far. To face that, an old person should remain most active for as long as it is possible.<sup>8</sup> The theory considers activity as a condition for any individual's emotional equilibrium and defines it as socially valued. It proposes undertaking activity to the best of older people's abilities as a measure of their positive self-image and their image in the eyes of other people. It seems obvious

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Roguska, A., (2009), Edukacja permanentna osób dorosłych w starości, [in:] T. Zacharuk, B. Boczukowa, Edukacja permanentna dorosłych w dobie przemian, Wydawnictwo Akademii Podlaskiej, Kielce, pp. 72–83.

<sup>7</sup> Szatur-Jaworska, B., Błądowski, P., Dziągiewska M., (2006), op. cit., pp. 161–162.

<sup>8</sup> Zych, A.A., (2001), Słownik gerontologii społecznej, Wydawnictwo Akademickie "Żak", Warszawa, p. 218.

that adjustment to old age depends to a great extent on the properly functioning social system. However, it also directly follows from the character and forms of the undertaken activity that, providing individuals with opportunities to reorganise their lives, at the same time increases their adaptation capabilities.<sup>9</sup>

The significance of activity in the old people's life is determined by its various functions including:

1. adaptive function – helping the elderly to adapt better to the new social and family situation;
2. integrative function – leading to a better adjustment within a group the elderly belong to;
3. compensation function – facilitating compensating for deficiencies in other spheres (e.g. lack of job, influence or authority);
4. educational function – helping to develop and improve personal features and dispositions of an individual;
5. recreational and entertainment function – helping to eliminate stress, restoring the will to live and filling up their spare time;
6. mental hygiene function – allowing the old to feel satisfaction. It can improve the quality of life by e.g. increasing authority.<sup>10</sup>

According to the activity theory of ageing the elderly wish to undertake activity just as they used to earlier in their lives. It follows from the way they perceive themselves and that in turn depends on the role they play or the activities they pursue.

Accordingly, the old, to maintain the positive image of themselves must replace the roles they have lost during the ageing process with new ones. Thus, the wellbeing of older people is the effect of their increasing activity in the new roles. The activity theory refers to the main assumption underlying numerous intervention programs for the old demonstrating the great importance of social activity as a condition for their increased life satisfaction. Advocates of the concept believe that older people in general need and aim at a high level of social activity. However, as Jerzy Halicki indicates referring to views expressed by Vern Bengston, the theory does not account for the meaning and importance of other forms of activity in their lives.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Chabior, A., (1997), Edukacja w życiu ludzi starych – komunikat z badań, "Edukacja" 1997/4, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> Szatur-Jaworska, B., Błędowski, P., Dzięgielewska M., (2006), op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Halicki, J., (2010), *Obrazy starości. Rysowane przeżyciami seniorów*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, Białystok, p. 14.

Thus, the active ageing concept is primarily connected with the old people's pursuit of independence and autonomy in the society.

## Main dimensions and determinants of undertaking intellectual activity by elderly people

Out of numerous activity forms the intellectual activity deserves particular attention as it best stimulates people triggering capabilities for adaptation to changeable living conditions and at the same time influences human life quality at every stage.

Challenges of the contemporary world make people of all ages learn continuously to get a good grasp of the surrounding world which means not only getting the general knowledge on current events. Above all, learning is "a process of continuously pursuing the feeling of unceasing participation in understanding and in shaping the image of reality. It also is the process of getting to know oneself and of gaining experience how to learn and how to gain real knowledge" (own translation)<sup>12</sup>.

Undertaking educational activity in old age may help to bridge the generation gap, teach mutual acceptance and understanding and result in a real and sincere dialogue with the younger generation. Also, the sole willingness of the older generation to take part in different forms of education may positively influence their image not only in the eyes of the young but also in their own perception and that generates the improved life quality during ageing.<sup>13</sup>

The developmental approach to life is an important factor contributing to the life satisfaction of older people and is the best possible preventive gerontology treatment. For that reason, popularisation of the educational model of life may prove beneficial for many older citizens. In fact, lifelong learning in Poland does not involve old people apart from some special cases of Universities of the Third Age functioning within the framework of Lifelong Learning Centres. Education of old people is not recognised as a public task and has not been included into the national education system. The research project PolSenior, commissioned by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and implemented in 2007-2011, has provided numerous arguments in favour of introduction of the comprehensive and multidimensional policy on human

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<sup>12</sup> Roguska, A., (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

ageing in Poland, also with respect to old people's access to lifelong learning putting into practice the idea of lifelong development.<sup>14</sup>

There are numerous policy statements and legal acts including rules and regulations concerning educational actions aimed at old people and their preparation for transition to old age, the major ones including:

1. Report on adult education "Learning to be. The world of education today and tomorrow." prepared by the commission chaired E. Faure in 1972.
2. Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing concerning rights of old people adopted by the World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 and the same year endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations (the so called Vienna Plan).
3. Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, a document concerning educational policy adopted by the European Committee in 2002 in Lisbon.
4. Decision No. 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning (LL) – Grundtvig Programme.
5. Decision No. 940/2011/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2011 on the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012 (O. J. EU. L.246/5).
6. Resolution of the Senate of the Republic of Poland of 1 February 2012 on establishing the year 2012 as the Year of Universities of the Third Age.
7. Lifelong Learning Perspectives – a strategic document, including the National Qualifications Framework, prepared by the Interdepartmental Committee for lifelong learning appointed by the Regulation no. 13 of the Prime Minister of 17 February 2010.
8. Strategy for developing lifelong learning adopted by the Council of Ministers in July 2003.
9. Programme "Solidarity across Generations – measures aiming at increasing the economic activity of people over 50".
10. Act of 14 April 2003 on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work (Journal of Laws 2010 No 234, item 1536, as amended).

Education is a unique challenge for people in old age as it allows them to comprehend transformations going on in the modern world. Another important fact is that nowadays learning consists not only of participating in organised

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<sup>14</sup> Borczyk, W., Wnuk, W., (2012), *Edukacja w starości i do starości*, [in:] Raport Komisji Ekspertów ds. Osób Starszych przy Rzeczniku Praw Obywatelskich. Strategie działania w starzejącym się społeczeństwie. Tezy i rekomendacje, Warszawa, p. 73.

forms of education but also of drawing on life experiences, own and those of other people, getting to know and understand oneself, other people and the surrounding world.<sup>15</sup> Learning in old age, free of school restraints, allows the people to shape positive ageing patterns contributing to formation of the new style of life popularising education as a value enriching life.<sup>16</sup>

In many countries education of old people is recognised as a unique sign of the times. Although undoubtedly senior citizens cherish and hand down traditions, they are not recognised as those who pass on knowledge. Accordingly, it is them who are educated because they need or wish to learn. To catch up with the advance of new technologies used for specific purposes old people are actually forced to take up education. A frequent motive for engaging in education is their will to make the most of their free time, to satisfy their cognitive curiosity and pursue hobbies – everything they could not do before due to the various roles they played.<sup>17</sup>

The considerations above seem to suggest that educational activity taken up by old people may be classified under two broad headings. One of the aspects is institutionalised education where old people participate in organised activities, mainly Universities of the Third Age. But educational activity of the old occurs also beyond any institutional framework, i.e. is more informal and individual and takes the shape of activity aimed at individual development of the person interested in it who chooses the type of education best suited to his/her own inclinations and interests (e.g. computer, language, skills, intellectual or general development courses).<sup>18</sup>

Issues concerning participation of the old in various spheres of social life and, as a consequence, their social involvement include also their participation in Universities of the Third Age classes.

The idea behind the U3As is incorporating elderly people into the system of lifelong learning, and thus their main goals include:

- popularising educational initiatives,
- intellectual, mental, social and physical activation of the old,

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Czerniawska, O., (1997), *Uczenie się jako styl życia*, [in:] M. Dzięgielewska (ed.), *Przygotowanie do starości*, Łódź, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Czerniawska, O., (1998), *Style życia w starości*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Humanistyczno-Ekonomicznej w Łodzi, Łódź, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Frąckowiak, A., (2007), *Edukacja seniorów w Stanach zjednoczonych*, [in:] A. Fabiś (ed.), *Instytucjonalne wsparcie seniorów. Rozwiązania polskie i zagraniczne*, Wyższa Szkoła Administracji w Bielsku-Białej, Bielsko-Biała, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Roguska, A., (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 82



- expanding knowledge and skills of elderly people,
- facilitating contacts with such institutions as: public health care, culture centres, physiotherapy centres etc.,
- engaging students into activities for the sake of their community,
- maintaining social bonds and communication between old people.<sup>19</sup>

The aim of U3As is intellectual, physical and social activation of senior citizens by means of cooperation with organisations operating within local communities including educational, cultural and social security institutions.<sup>20</sup>

The principal goal of Universities of the Third Age is to improve the quality of life of their students. The universities teach the knowledge popularising healthy lifestyle, assisting students in social interactions and helping them to take advantage of their free time. It allows them to get accustomed to the ageing process which is not necessarily identical with the necessity of withdrawing from activity. All U3A actions have a positive dimension to them: they help to kindle and pursue passions, increase physical activity of the aged and integrate students at meetings which constitute a major part of the U3A actions.<sup>21</sup> International reports prepared by UNESCO also point out to advantages of Universities of The Third Age stressing the role of education in the domains of: personality development, establishing and reinforcing social bonds, developing attained knowledge and interests, passing on personal experiences to family members and the whole society and active participation in the social life.<sup>22</sup>

Although the functioning in Poland Universities of the Third Age seem to fail to meet their aims to the full, they still allow old people not only to make up for their educational deficiencies dating from their earlier lives, but also give them broader perspectives owing to their extensive offer of activities and classes. People at their age can pursue their passions and seek new ones. Additionally, participation in the social life of a group of people at similar age and with a similar outlook on life becomes helpful in overcoming everyday difficulties and barriers and adjusting to changes in the ever transforming world. Integration with people originating from different communities and social

<sup>19</sup> Hrapkiewicz, E., (2009), *Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku jako jedna z form kształcenia osób starszych*, [in:] B. Stopińska-Pająk (ed.), *Edukacja wobec starości – tradycja i współczesność*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> Ziębińska, B., *Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku jako instytucje przeciwdziałające marginalizacji osób starszych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Śląsk”, Katowice, p. 326.

<sup>21</sup> Orzechowska, G., (1999), *Aktualne problemy gerontologii społecznej*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, Olsztyn, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Szatur-Jaworska, B., Błędowski, P., Dziegielewska M., (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 172.

groups makes it easier for elderly citizens to understand various phenomena and external information.<sup>23</sup>

Determinants for undertaking intellectual activity by older people are strictly connected with problems in adjusting to old age. They are inseparable from old people's attitudes towards the old age, the behaviour patterns they assume, lifestyles, fears and apprehensions they feel and stereotypes functioning within the society.

Literature on the subject indicates that the way of experiencing old age follows from the previous life of every person. Whether a person is active or passive depends mainly on their way of life and on circumstances beyond the individuals' control. Therefore, the lifestyle of an individual in old age definitely determines the kind of activity the person undertakes.

The strongest determinant for undertaking intellectual activity by the elderly is, besides their health, the economic situation. That factor is generally presumed to have a decisive impact on their attitudes, and particularly on taking up and the choice of a particular activity form. Economic situation of older people influences, e.g. their financial decisions, the understanding of their rights, capability to adjust to changing reality conditions or the awareness of the necessity to ensure themselves decent living conditions.<sup>24</sup>

Another essential fact is that the elderly attach importance to the usefulness of the educating process, especially if it is to satisfy their cognitive needs in the domain of utilitarian knowledge. Practical skills acquired by the old should help them to overcome everyday difficulties, to meet their needs independently and autonomously, to solve the most fundamental problems and adjust to the changed life situation - hence the increased demand of that social group for supplementing their education concerning operating mobile phones, computers or even cash machines. They are also willing to consult specialists in different domains supporting and facilitating their independent functioning in the society, e.g. dieticians, physical therapists, gerontologists, economists or lawyers.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of a lifestyle includes not only human behaviour but also psycho-physical mechanisms underlying them, namely: motivations, needs, accepted

<sup>23</sup> Orzechowska, G., (1999), op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Fabiś, A., (2006), *Edukacja seniorów – odpowiedź na wymagania współczesności*, „Edukacja Dorosłych” 1–2, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Aleksander, T., (1992), *Potrzeby kulturalno-oświatowe ludzi dorosłych*, [in:] T. Wujek (ed.), *Wprowadzenie do pedagogiki dorosłych*, PWN, Warszawa, pp. 332–335.

values that may determine to a large extent the activity taken up by old people. Therefore, some other aspects the elderly attach certain importance to should be considered. One of them is the budget of time, i.e. the way people make use of their time and the following from it cycle of everyday functioning (24h, weekly, monthly or yearly). Another vital factor is the approach to work, its characteristics and the time spent on performing it. The consumption of goods, its intensity, character and patterns are also relevant as well as behaviours associated with satisfying intellectual and aesthetic needs, participation in culture and education, recreational activities, attitude towards values, participation in social and political life, forms of human interaction and particularly distribution of roles within the family, socialising, friendship or neighbourhood relations.<sup>26</sup>

Considering the question of main determinants for assuming intellectual activity by the elderly one should also take into account factors influencing the sole fact of undertaking any activity at all. Among many, the major ones in the context of the present paper seem to include:

- education – the higher the education of an individual the higher level of activity she/he undertakes;
- family environment – intellectual activity depends on personalities of family members, origin and contacts with relatives (children, grandchildren and others);
- living conditions – may limit any activity to a considerable extent;
- sex – there are more retired women and therefore it is them who take up activity;
- place of residence (city, countryside) – is connected with the offered forms of activity for old people;
- availability and characteristics of activities included in the offer put forward by cultural and educational institutions in the place of old people's residence (e.g. Universities of the Third Age, Seniors' Clubs).<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, it may be stated that intellectual activity forming the basis for old people's adjustment to the changed life situation and to the ever changing reality is becoming increasingly important not only for people growing old but also for the whole society. As the ageing process cannot be averted, making the biggest possible group of the community aware of the problems may counteract many negative consequences of functioning of the ageing society in the future.

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<sup>26</sup> Szatur-Jaworska, B., Błędowski, P., Dziegielewska, M., (2006), op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 162.