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## REFLECTION ON REDEFINITION OF ELDERLY PEOPLE'S ROLE IN THE MODERN SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

**Summary.** The purpose of the presented paper is to redefine the place and category of elderly people facing the demographic and cultural changes in the contemporary world. It presents the lack of precision to define the topic because of the internal category differentiation. The paper makes an attempt to discuss the generation gap distance on the basis of Margaret Mead's theory and tries to give an answer to the question of the present and future role of elderly people in the post-modern society.

**Key words:** elderly people, age as a socio-demographic category, generation distance, transformation experience, social roles of elderly people

### 1. Introduction

Polish society is getting older and older. During the last 50 years (1950–2004) we have noted a growth of a percentage of people above 64 from 5,3% to 13,0%, which means that now we have almost 6.5 million people in their sixties and more. Demographic forecasts say that in the next two decades it can increase to almost 30% [Zierkiewicz, Łysak 2006].

Causes of such affairs are well recognized and described in the literature, which entitles me to their omission. Society ageing process has the connection with longer life expectancy, lower mortality, decreased number of births, demographic waving and migrations.

This 'demographic revolution' is unavoidably going to have consequences in any areas of social life. They are economic, political, cultural and – at the lowest rate – in families and local environment. The importance and the range of these changes make us have a deep reflection concerning elderly people's role which they play in a modern society. In the information society we observe an increasing share of services in global economy, the quick technical development, growing importance of innovations, creativity and competitiveness.

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The purpose of the presented paper is to redefine the place and category of elderly people facing the demographic and cultural changes in the contemporary world in the light of literature and researches.

After this short introduction I would like to bring terminological issues up, because they are not obvious and clear. We do not actually know who elderly people are. Using the term 'elderly people' is an unauthorized, although very popular in the public and scientific discourse, mental short cut.

## **2. The age as a socio – demographic category**

Referring to the category of the age is causing some certain definitional problems. The age, as well as a sex, educational level, marital status and a place of living, is used in sociology as the so-called independent criterion. Problems appear when we consider the biological age of the individual in relation to its functioning in the society [Kowaleski, Szukalski, 2008].

The differentiation of generation structures is troublesome because firstly, they are the subject to constant changes. Secondly, they are not closely connected with the physical development of individuals. The history of the civilization shows that the defining what age the individual is, cannot be determined by strict rules.

Sociological criteria state that the young are the people being somewhere between biological and social maturity, which is usually identified with setting up a family, starting a career or economic and emotional independence. It is worthwhile to pay attention how much the social roles connected with the calendar age have changed over the centuries. Today's "young man" being only in the phase of preparation for independent existence, was once a fully formed member of the society. Achieving the adulthood (from a present point of view) was often the reason to perceive oneself as an elderly man. This is the moment to discuss the age in a subjective way.

In 2007 researches depicting opinions of Poles about the structure of the age were carried out [CBOS, 2007]. The survey included the following questions: "When does the youth end and the elderly age start?", "How long do we regard ourselves as young people and when we start to feel old?"

Findings of the examination demonstrate the following scheme: youth lasts till 35, then maturity comes, and from 62 we are already elderly. On the basis of the question about self identification with age it turned out that 42% of examined people consider themselves to be young people, 36% are classified among the population of middle-aged, while every fifth (21%) claims to be an old person.

The development in the medicine and technological field, the civilization conveniences caused that the border of elderly age comprehended as the state of physical infirmity and the intellectual senility has considerably shifted. At the

same time, the period of preparation for life, which means professional and social immaturity, got much longer. The term "elderly people" refers both to people 85+ and those who are only approaching the retirement age. In this case it can also refer to people in their late fifties who are going to retire. This way within one social category we deal with thirty cohorts, which is classified as a generation change.

### **3. Elderly people – the characteristics of the category**

It is said that the category of elderly people is the most varied age group. Except for the birth certificates, the condition of health, qualifications or sex also play a diversifying role. Elder people are members of different generations in its cultural meaning. This term refers to specific generation experience, for example war or revolution [Ossowska, 1963].

Researchers notice positive correlation between the level of education and the condition of health. It may be because of a greater awareness of the need to take preventive measures, to have a proper diet and to lead a healthy lifestyle that a category of elderly people is the most inwardly diversified group of age. Moreover, educated people are mainly the dwellers of cities where they can have a better access to specialist medical facilities.

Elderly people are a clearly feminised category. The majority of women in the population is already observed from the age of 44, and in cohorts of people above the age of 80, the number of women becomes doubled in comparison with men. It must be emphasized that even if women live longer, their health is in bad condition. They also have smaller incomes than men.

Another diversifying issue is an economic factor. According to professor Szatur-Jaworska [2000] research, the situation of households where the main income is the pension is totally different from those in which disability pension constitutes the only income.

If you assume that the average Polish household incomes represent 100%, senior citizen's households get the 97% of this size. However, disability pensioner's households constitute only 70% of this number. This value will amount to medians appropriately 100, 109 and 76. It means that incomes of senior citizens in Poland are relatively high, however one should notice quite great discord between the objective level of profits and subjective feeling of deprivation.

It is possible to explain it with the existence of the following conditions. Firstly, the pension is lower than incomes obtained from work. Secondly, the majority of pensioners don't have prospects for the improvement of their situation. The last condition concerns the little scope of free disposal fund. It means large number of fixed expenses, for example for medicines, maintenance costs and medical care.

#### 4. Generation gap

It may be concluded that the period of economic and political transformation in Poland, which included the development of new technologies and the fast pace of cultural changes, had an influence on the increasing generation gap. Elderly people had the feeling that the knowledge and skills are no longer useful in the contemporary world. With criticism of the communism, in a way, a generation memory was taken away from them, because whether they liked it or not, they symbolized the previous system. Between the young and the old a lot of prejudice and dislike occurred. Benefits from the cooperation between the young and the old were not noticed, as well as the needs of elderly people. It seemed, sometimes it happens nowadays, that elderly people are satisfied only when they devote their life, e.g. helping children bring up grandchildren or taking care of sick people. Meanwhile, it turns out that elderly people are also characterized by healthy egoism and willingness of realization of their dreams.

The theory of Margaret Mead introduced in the book "The Study of Culture at a Distance" refers to the problem of the relationship between generations [Mead, 2000]. Three types of societies were described on the basis of the process of learning. It is possible to decipher the idea of the author from the following titles of chapters:

1. Past. Postfigurative cultures, that is, invaluable ancestors.
2. The present time. Cultures cofigurative, that is, found peers.
3. Future. Prefigurative cultures, that is, mysterious children.

Postfigurative societies are based on traditional outline characteristic to original cultures: children learn from adults in order to perform later their social roles. The lack of written sources assured the elders specific monopoly on the knowledge. The life-cycle looked similar for individual generations, while the continuity of social identity was conditioned by the tradition. A weak tendency to the innovation existed in cultures of this type, however there was a strong group identity and a high level of public control. Such model seemed to be rational and justified because, according to the theory of Darwin, only the best adapted individuals reached their late ages.

In the hard times of transformations the model of the cofigurative culture is being developed, in which the transmission of the knowledge occurs on two levels. It is still relayed from parents to their children, but this knowledge in the new situation is no longer sufficient. The youth start to learn from their peers, which makes the seniors' authority much weaker. The elements of the generation gap appear. Cofiguration is connected with the process of modernization and includes the element of bigger openness for changes. Mead states that such a state can be only temporary and after finishing reforming the structures and the institutions, the society comes back to be postfigurative.

The last chapter describes the third model of the society whose synthesis may be presented as follows. Contemporary antagonism between parents and children is something more than the manifestation of ordinary generation gap. Its sources are bound with the changes caused by the development of technology and globalization. The conclusion is, that even in spite of close relationship, both groups were brought up in two completely different, incomparable worlds. Elderly are convinced, that in the past there always were people who knew more than any child, because they already gathered amounted experience from growing in the certain system of culture. Today there are no such adults, and parents are not good leaders. There are no adults who know the experience of being born twenty years ago and brought up by them [Mead, 2000].

Since the elderly and more experienced lost their authority, who is the main creator of contemporary world? In the prefigurative society the answer is one: young people. The young generation is becoming the model for elderly how to behave in the world of incessant alterations, pace of which is constantly growing in the age of globalization.

Until recently, especially with reference to the technological plane, primacy of the young seemed absolute. Strong antagonism between the old and the young was also visible in the area of culture. The stereotypes appeared as a result of this. During the last few years in Polish public discourse a myth of such called mohair berets, which symbolize the elderly, has appeared. The discourse shifted into the wide society awareness. The latter headwear symbolizes an old feminized generation which connotes with the following features: the conservatism, the facade religiousness, the dislike for the innovations, anxiety of the unknown, the support for the traditional family model, the homophony.

## **5. The challenges connected with the aging process**

It seems, that elderly people, whose population is constantly growing, will no longer want to stay in the shadow of other social categories. Citizens live longer and longer, they enjoy their better health and can take active part in the social life, share their time and experience. The research shows that 1/3 Poles above 60 agree with the statement that in their life still a lot good can happen rather than with the one that all the best in life is over [CBOS, 2007].

The consequence of such declarations may and should be a lack of common agreement to push old people back to the margin of the social life. New demographic reality determines the following challenges:

- Exploiting the potential of old people and increasing their activity.
- Showing the public opinion the benefits coming from contacts between generations.

- Change of the negative image of an older person - showing that his/her experience and knowledge are great value in contemporary world.
- Creating the chance for young people to keep deep contacts with seniors - breaking mutual prejudice and stereotypes.

Meeting challenges of ageing society requires both from the young and the elderly the sympathy, sensitivity and the respect for the needs and expectations of people belonging to various age groups. Opening to the needs, knowledge and skills of old people, understanding the peculiarity of the ageing process, defeating the fear of the ageing process seem to be absolutely necessary.

It is also extremely important to combat all signs of the discrimination connected with age (ageism) and change of the negative image of the old created in Polish media. Until recently it has been an unpopular topic and if it appeared, it was shown in the negative context: disability, illnesses, poverty. There was a shortage of positive social context showing the old people. Fortunately, the current image seems to be changing. The elderly are being shown in an attractive and interesting way, often with reference to actions bringing generations together. Those are the first signs that the change of the stereotype is possible.

## **6. Elderly people in information society**

In the nearest future the situation of Poland and Europe will be determined by two main currents: on the one hand the paradigm of the information society and the knowledge - based economy and ageing societies on the other. These two factors must be taken into consideration at taking the decision of strategic importance.

The new place and the role of old people in the society of the third wave [Toffler, 1997] is an opened question at present. Answering it can have crucial meaning for the shape and functioning of the modern society.

Alvin Toffler, during his visit in Warsaw few years ago, gave the thesis that the ones who do not know principles of work in the Excel would not be at loss in the civilization of the third wave, but the ones who are not able to study and restudy effectively. We find similar reflection at Margaret Meads'. In the past the man relied on the least complicated element of periodic system - on forcing children to learn, and it guaranteed the permanence of passing on the knowledge, not to mention the possibility of supplementing it by new discoveries. Today we should focus on andragogica. In fact we must learn how to change adults so that we can forget our postfigurative upbringing with included cofigurative components and we would be able to discover prefigurative ways of learning and handing over the knowledge which will save us from missing many opportunities in the future. We must create new standards for adults who should teach

children not how they should study and not what they should identify itself with, but only that identification is a great value [Mead, 2000].

It explains an idea of the entire life learning. On the one hand it is posing a threat to elderly people, in the respect of decreasing with age, according to many researchers, biological predispositions to the perception of information. On the other hand, while some elements of the intelligence can be weakened, others even inversely. Changes in the intellectual activity of elderly people depends in the huge rank on the long-lasting intellectual training and achieved level of the mind [Wiśniewska-Roszkowska, 1987]. It is worthwhile to remind the fact, that the considerable part of the greatest characters in the history of civilization created their most outstanding works only at the end of their life.

Experience and the accumulation of knowledge are the processes whose importance cannot be underestimated. The thesis is confirmed by the existence of the passive vote threshold, which allows to carry out the important roles in governments only by people who are at the certain age. Besides substantive abilities and the knowledge, practical experience guaranties, in a way, the competence for performing important roles.

It is worth to underline that people, who during the next few decades will have been determined as old, have experienced the transformation. It was a deep change, in some areas, even revolutionary. The Polish reality today looks totally different from those twenty years ago. Adapting to them required from people a certain attitude, no matter how successful. It can bring both negative and positive consequences. As negative ones we can rank possible mistrust and fear. As for advantages, they can be such components as opening, innovation and the enterprise. It is possible to suggest a hypothesis claiming that the experience of transformation can help people find themselves in a reality of the information society. In addition, one should be aware of different conditioning of both processes. We are not already dealing with one sudden wave of transformations, but with permanent waving. However, the way of reacting to the change, the specific outline of action has already been drawn in the psychological structure of the society.

The question occurs. Is this scheme flexible enough to cope with the challenge of globalizing world. It is possible to have justified doubts looking at present cohorts of seventy- or eighty-year-olds analyzing the structure of the Internet users' age in Poland. Senior citizens are occupying only a decimal part, in comparison with 41% in Norway, 31% in Germany and 28% in Great Britain [by the Eurostat, Committee of Forecasts 'Polska 2000 Plus', 2008].

One should remember that the number of these cohorts is decreasing in a natural way, and their place will be taken by people much more diversified in terms of their outlook, having greater skills in the acquisition of the technology and communication. In all likelihood we can state that the competence of these people will be transferred into the change of old people's lifestyle and perceiving them by the society.



## **7. Possible directions of change in the roles performed by elderly people in the society**

The role of the Internet user mentioned above is a relatively new achievement of the civilization. The challenges of the ageing information society will require a deep redefinition of the traditional roles performed by the old. The most important ones include the role of family member, an employee, a consumer and a citizen.

The role of a family member can be seen as protective functions. One should distinguish two aspects: care performed by elderly people, for example taking care of grandchildren as well as caring about old people who require it. The latter perspective comprises with the stereotype depicting grandmother/grandfather in Poland. It is a common role in which elderly people find themselves best because of their devotion to the family, necessity to be needed, altruistic desire for bringing help. Such image is consolidated culturally and widely accepted. Additionally, it is supported by the deficiency of social infrastructure in the field of children's care.

Insufficient amount of crèches and nursery schools, kindergartens and common rooms, unsuited to present standards of the labour market working hours, low payment as well as maintenance costs exceeding the abilities of many households.

Facing the trend of the reducing fertility and on the basis of the analogy to countries of Western Europe it is also possible to pull out the thesis that the protective role of elderly people in the families will be gradually reduced providing the infrastructure will develop. This will enable to strengthen other social roles: longer professional activity, no matter if they are before or during taking the pension benefit. A promotion of flexible forms of employment as well as increasing the awareness of employers in the scope of exploiting abilities are supporting the potential of senior workers.

A possible result of longer staying on the labour market and increasing the individual responsibility for the material status in older ages can result in considerable economic potential. Certainly even the increasing population of elderly people in the demographic structure will change their position as consumers. We can observe that little interest being taken by producers of goods and marketers in older consumers slowly begins to change. One of the examples is a pioneering Dove campaign: "Real Beauty", accompanying the advertisement of products pro-age, as an alternative to presented so far on this market anti-age products. Moreover, the peculiar service sector connected with the demand created by old people appears on the market, for example in the banking sector.

On the other hand, in the face of decreasing fertility, income redistribution may become a problem. On macroeconomic scale there is a serious threat of



instability of the social security system, especially the pension system. The forecasts say that in the future we will have to deal with a constant decrease in the replacement rate of income by the pension [European Commission, 2010]. This means that without additional funding sources such as savings or the support of the family it can be difficult to maintain the previous standard of living. It seems to be inevitable to increase the individual responsibility of citizens to ensure their financial situation in the old age. Taking into consideration the current low propensity to save in Poland, it can pose a serious challenge [CBOS, 2010].

With reference to above tendencies one should also expect the increase of the significance of elderly people in the political domain. "Going grey" electorate's voice power will be more and more significant. However, in Poland we observe a relatively weak tendency of integration because of the age. People are rather faithful to political parties throughout their entire lives. One should not await to be ruled by the party of senior citizens and pensioners, however it cannot be ruled out.

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