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The lifestyle of senior citizens, or what affects their change

Streszczenie

Badanie dotyczyło polskich seniorów uczestniczących w objazdowych podróżach zagranicznych. Wyniki badań pokazały, że najczęstszymi powodami zmiany stylu życia okazały się: przejście na emeryturę, śmierć współmałżonka, choroby przewlekłe, nowy partner życiowy. Nowe style życia wiązały się z próbą dostosowania do świata ponowoczesnego, obrony przed dyskryminacją i ageismem.

Słowa kluczowe:

starzenie się, seniorzy, style życia

Abstract

The study concerned Polish seniors involved in going on tours abroad. The results showed that the most common causes of lifestyle changes were retirement, the death of a spouse, chronic illness, or a new life partner. New ways of life were associated with an attempt to adapt to the postmodern world, protection against discrimination, and ageism.

Key words:

aging, senior citizens, lifestyles

It could be said that old age is, to some extent, a convention. Today, this stage in human life begins at the age of 60, but more and more often it is said that it is actually 65. In a few years, it will probably be 70.

In various academic disciplines there are at least several definitions of the phrase “old age”. For a biologist, old age primarily means the weakening of the body and the reduction of its resilience, capacity and efficiency that comes with age. For economists, people are old when they need the help of others because of their condition. Sociologists associate old age with the retreat of people of certain age to the margins of society. Psychology points to the reduction of possibilities which senior citizens experience. They are worse at assimilating new information and struggle to accept changes. Gerontologists call the period between the age of 60 and 75 “early old age”. The WHO definition sets it around 60, and there are criteria indicating the age of 65.

According to the CBOS survey of the 2012, youth lasts until the age of 37 (the mean age of 36.97). From this moment onward, the age of maturity begins, and it continues until the age of 63 (precisely 63 years and 3 months). After this age, according to the respondents, old age begins (in 2007 it was 61 years and 3 months). In the 65–69 age group, more than half of the respondents think of themselves as old people. Nearly three

quarters of Poles (72%) think about their old age (CBOS 2012); women being more likely to do so than men. Poles set the threshold of old age quite early; in the Nordic countries the indicated age is 80 – only then does old age begin. Periods of old age vary as well. All old people cannot be regarded in the same way.

In my research, conducted between 2009 and 2012, I wanted to look at the lifestyles of retired people, at whether those lifestyles change, and at what affects those changes. I was also interested in whether those people see themselves as old, and what old age was. Because the subject of activity of the elderly – mainly in the area of participation in the UTA and senior clubs – often appears in literature, I was interested in whether senior citizens were active in other areas of life, such as travel and foreign tourism.

I took more than 20 trips abroad and my study involved nearly 100 people (the majority were women; mostly widows or divorcees). Respondents identified with old people as a group, although they themselves did not feel old. They were elderly due to their age and the youth culture in which they had to live. They also felt old because of their attachment to tradition, their hierarchy of values, or because of their lifestyle (to some extent inherited from their parents.) *Yes, I am elderly, I am 66 years old. All around they talk about young people; only young people can be seen on television, in newspapers, everywhere. No wrinkles, no unnecessary folds of fat. Young people run through the streets, talk loudly in buses.* Another respondent said: *In my day it was different. Women behaved modestly. Old people were respected. Today, only mobile phones and the internet rule.* Yet another: *My granddaughter urged me to buy a computer and start using the internet. I came around when she went abroad. Now every day we talk on Skype. I had to change to be more modern.*

From the respondents' point of view, old age meant physical or mental disability, dependence on others (children, caregivers), chronic illness, or "shutting oneself in one's home", staying only within the circle of family and media. *Old age is a kind of passive vegetation – eating, taking medication, watching something, sleeping. Occasionally someone, usually a mailman, pays a visit. And that's it.* Aging was associated with the old model of the elderly of their youth. *I remember my grandmother; it seemed to me that she was terribly old, although she was in her 60s then. She was stooped, always dressed in dark colors, her hair was gray, her face wrinkled. As long as she could walk, she took care of us and our home. She was always doing something. She went to church; it was important. I do not remember her going out anywhere else, or meeting anybody.* The interviewed women, no longer useful as caregivers to their grandchildren, yet still physically fit, decided to change their life.

Trying to reconstruct the ways of life of seniors, as the subjects of my study preferred to be called (*senior sounds a bit nicer*; "elderly", "old" reminds me of something worn out, useless – no, I prefer to be a senior), I adopted the concept of Andrzej Siciński.

He drew attention to the differences in lifestyles, to the free choice made by people, to their own and individual arrangements of cultural space that constitute lifestyles. Lifestyle, which is a characteristic way of existing, distinguishes one individual from another. These behaviors, however, vary in scope and form, and are aimed at specific purposes; nevertheless, the motivations of these actions are also important (Siciński 2002: 22–23). Types of needs and means of satisfying them determine lifestyles. Lifestyle makes it possible to locate an individual in the social context, and it is not only a matter of assigning them a social class, but also such categories as occupation, sex and age group. Choice regarding meeting their needs is determined to a large extent by economic situation, but it also may be accompanied, as Pierre Bourdieu would say, by the size of cultural, symbolic and social capital (Bourdieu 2006).

In their responses, the interviewed people clearly stressed situations and circumstances that have changed their current lifestyles.

Most often they indicated the fact of retirement. While it had previously been eagerly anticipated, in a sense, after a few months such life became boring and routine. The course and the organization of days, weeks and years changed. The social world of the surveyed people shrank; over time, they lost contact with friends from work. For some, the need to be useful – *I didn't feel old and useless yet, I had the strength and desire to do something* – was satisfied by taking care of grandchildren. Some took up jobs to fill their free time with activities: *now I work in a newsstand, I have contact with people, I have to take care of myself so as not to scare off the customers*. Others sought interesting cultural engagement in their immediate and broader environment, as determined by their financial situation and interests: *I enrolled my wife and myself in a dance class, and sometimes we go to the theater, when tickets for senior citizens are available. We also attended classes at the UTA*. The desire to change their lifestyle was declared, above all, by people who were open to change throughout their entire lives: *all our lives we were changing something; we were adjusting. We were never bored, even when we were alone. Together with our friends, we were always organizing something; some trips and meetings*.

Another reason for change was the death of a spouse. Suddenly, emptiness emerged. There was nobody to care for, no one to talk to or argue with anymore. *I missed Staś, his shuffling slippers, his whining, but also the fact that I had someone to hug; to complain to*. Some of the respondents began to actively participate in the life of their parish, and others, at their friends' urging, began embracing the world of modern technology. They began to find new friends in different networks targeted toward senior citizens and others, and continued their interests, acquiring additional knowledge from the internet – *now I have access to a variety of recipes, I watch blogs and pictures of dishes which are very appetizing* – or learning something new – *friends from the website taught me to use Skype and several computer programs. Now I know how to navigate the internet; what*

“to google something” means. I must admit that I myself learned a lot about taking pictures or places worth seeing from my friends at the [Senior.pl](#) website.

Yet another reason for life changes was chronic disease. It took a lot to reorganize and learn a new way of life. I had to refurbish the apartment; to adjust it to my disability. It was hard. But it was even harder for me to leave the house, do errands or go shopping. Maintaining fitness also required lifestyle adjustments: new diets, physical therapy, leaving the house and escaping the disease or disability – It was only after I started physical therapy, that I saw that others somehow had reconciled themselves with their disease. We became friends. They gave me lots of good advice. I’m happy; I now have new friends, I have someone I can talk to about my concerns.

The last category which appeared in responses of the interviewed, were other people. Here, lifestyle changes were influenced by either the closest family members (children, grandchildren) or friends or new partners. *You know, they talked us into this traveling. We save every penny for trips. They ran a blog, showed photos from their excursions, described some interesting country that they had visited.* Or another response – *Our children bought us our first trip as a gift for our wedding anniversary. We loved it. Now our life revolves around journeys. We get some additional work, save, browse the internet looking for good deals, and then we go on a trip.*

The situation of those subjects who entered into new relationships was particularly difficult. Those relationships were not fully accepted by their families: *They were angry that I forgot about their father. He’s been dead for 10 years. I want to be with someone every day, not just on holidays, when they have time to visit me.* Or another response: *It changed my life. I felt stronger, but I also started to take care of myself, because she also cares.*

In conclusion, we can say that the lifestyles and life patterns of retirees are changing, and that there is a departure from passivity to activity. Of course, the dominant model is still not that of an active senior citizen. Nevertheless, it is apparent that senior citizens try to come into their own in a different culture, sometimes foreign to them, in a post-modern world. They try to follow Giddens’ suggestions that the sooner we free ourselves from the rule of tradition, the more options we have to choose from (Giddens 2001). Timidly, they enter the world of modern technology, trying to satisfy their curiosity about the world and people. They do it cautiously, yet they do it. Senior citizens realize that their retirement period is given to them to meet their specific needs; for their self-realization or acceptance. Despite their retirement, they try to look for additional work not only to supplement their budgets, but also to be able to satisfy their own needs and the needs of their grandchildren or children. In addition to tangible benefits – i.e. financial resources – this form of professional activity gives people a sense of being useful, rejuvenates them, and transfers them to the productive, active segment of the population, although they are already of retirement age. For people who travel at

least 2–3 times a year, funds are essential. To supplement their income, single senior citizens rent rooms in their apartments, mostly for young people. They also begin to use financial tools to increase their revenues. Using the internet is almost a necessity for senior tourists. These technologies enable them to search for interesting excursions, exchange views on message boards, and buy travel and photography accessories, as well as clothes and shoes for everyday use, at bargain prices. Such activities are advantageous in terms of saving money (products are cheaper than in brick and mortar shops) and time (they do not need to leave home to go shopping). As indicated by the respondents, the internet is not only an instrument for entertainment, although it is also used for entertainment purposes: seniors belong to hobby groups (traveling, playing cards, cooking, photography, etc.), make new friends, read a variety of content, watch movies or listen to music. As the respondents declared, they want to continue to be attractive, healthy and fit. They also acquire medical knowledge from the internet more often, although they verify it during medical appointments. In the case of women, while the family did not express their negative views on exercise or diet changes, in relation to appearance (style of dress, changing hairstyle, including hair colour) and especially make-up, children were critical of their mothers – claiming that it was not proper, that they should their age. In this case, the adult children treated their mothers as children who behave inappropriately. Also, children often showed disapproval of their parents' new relationships. Besides addressing their need to be useful in the areas of family and work, a minority of surveyed senior citizens also work for the local community. They participate in parish life, work in housing communities, and in some cases also in various associations. A significant relationship can be observed. Immediately after retirement, the social world of the surveyed people narrowed mainly to their immediate family, and their everyday practices and rituals changed. However after some groundbreaking incident or discouragement, or boredom associated with an excess of free time, the subjects introduced changes into their lifestyles.

All of the above lifestyle changes were related to some costs; either emotional or financial. In many cases, new ways of life were a defense against discrimination on grounds of age – *I know I'm old, but that doesn't mean that I should stay at home and stop working or hanging out with friends* – or exclusion from many walks of life – *I don't leave home, but I am up to date. TV doesn't give me as much as the internet. I feel free, I can engage in discussion at forums where no one asks about age; I can drink coffee while talking with my friends on Skype. On the internet, I can buy shoes and clothes that I couldn't get in the real world.* Respondents are aware that living in a culture of young people, they cannot compete with them in terms of experience or knowledge, but the solution may be making adjustments in their preferred range – composing their lifestyle in a way that would give them satisfaction and enable them to meet their needs at this stage of life. However, the basic prerequisite here is health, a willingness to change, and acceptance.

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