

Identyfikacja kondycji życiowej środowiska osób starszych

Identification of the living conditions of elderly persons

Elżbieta Markiewicz

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Social Sciences in Łódź, Poland

Streszczenie

Identyfikacja kondycji życiowej środowiska senioralnego stanowi próbę diagnozy zorientowanej na rozpoznanie i ocenę sytuacji życiowej osób starych. Celem podjętej analizy, była próba określenia czynników warunkujących jakości życia społeczeństwa senioralnego. Dlatego też, starano się pokazać zmiany zachodzące w strukturze demograficznej społeczeństw wraz z prognozą i konsekwencjami wzrostu liczby osób starych w populacji. Przedstawiono również sytuację ekonomiczną generacji senioralnej oraz wskazano możliwe formy jej aktywności w kontekście kształcenia ustawicznego. Istotnym elementem było omówienie rodzajów wsparcia i pomocy w sferze socjalnej, jak i zwrócenie uwagi na sposobności aktywnego uczestnictwa w różnych działaniach projektowych zorientowanych na adaptację i aktywizację starości. (Gerontol Pol 2015, 3, 89-00)

Słowa kluczowe: starość, senior, jakość życia, aktywne starzenie się, diagnoza sytuacji osób starych

Abstract

The identification of living conditions of the senior environment constitutes the attempt of the diagnosis orientated to the exploration and the evaluation of old people's life situation. The purpose of decision analysis, was an attempt to determine the factors affecting the quality of life of the senior society. Therefore, an effort was made to show changes taking place in the demographic structure of societies along with prognosis and consequences of the increase in the number of elderly people in the population. An economic situation of the senior generation was also presented as well as the possible forms of its activities in the context of the continuing education. The significant element was the overview of the types of support and assistance in the social sphere, as well as drawing attention to opportunities of active involvement in various project actions orientated to the adaptation and the activation of the old age. (Gerontol Pol 2015, 1, 89-00)

Key words: old age, senior, quality of life, active ageing, diagnosis of the situation of elderly people

Introduction

Contemporarily, we observe considerable extension of the lifespan, which was undoubtedly affected by such phenomena as: technical-computer progress, socioeconomic changes, the growth of the standard of living of the population and the development and the achievements of medicine. As a result of the transformations connected with the civilization progress, a number of elderly people in the population intensifies. What is more, the inversion of their current situation in life occurs. Thus, the diagnosis of living condition of elderly persons will require the analysis and the attempt to determine the factors affecting the quality of life of the senior society. This means, the attempt to analyse of issues from the scope of: demography, financial situation of the

senior environment, forms of the education, the health-care and the social activity of elderly people.

An ageing society presents new challenges in the educational, health and institutional dimension. The considerable increase in the percentage of the elderly people upsets the numerical balance between working and productive people on one hand and post-productive people living at the working population's expense on the other. This situation poses a challenge for the countries' social policy. The phenomenon is relatively new so it requires construction of special programmes guaranteeing the access to specialist social and health services. It means that orientating social and business-economic strategies to the proper adaptation of the old age and promoting the idea of healthy ageing and the senior citizens' activation. Therefore, the process of the intensified conver-

sion of the demographic structure of societies finds its implications not only in the population, but also in social and business-economic sphere. It translates into greater demand for some services connected with e.g. health or social care. It influences the change of structures of the workforce, increases expenses of keeping non-productive persons. Adjusting the infrastructure and funding different fields from social-economic life is needed by the state to implement changes taking an ageing society into account.

Demography and financial prospects of elderly people

“Not only in Poland, but also all over the world a number of elderly people is still increasing, therefore, one should immediately make an effort to identify the problems of persons who live their old age in the present times and consequently abandon stereotypes giving seniors only peripheral social status” [1].

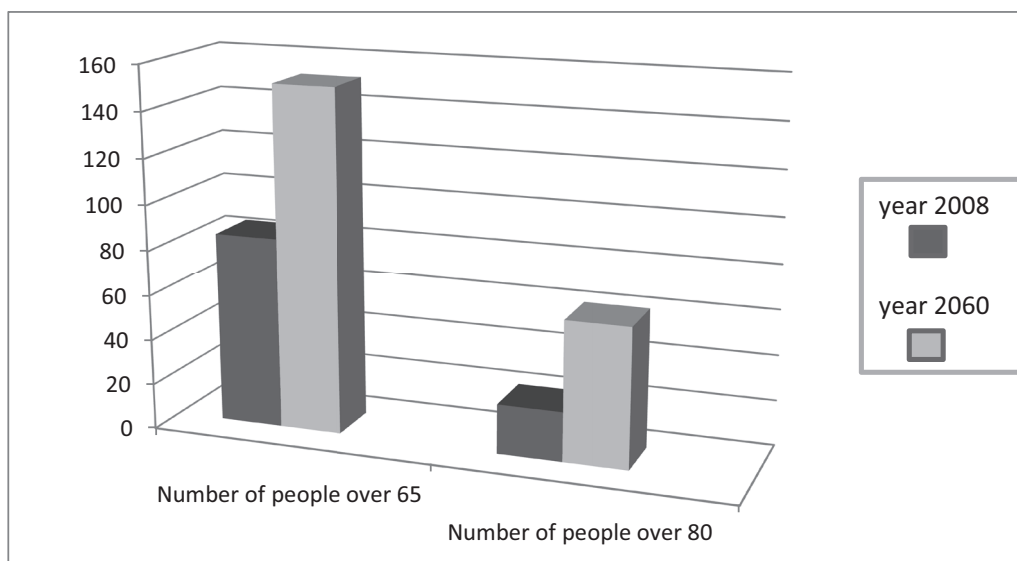
Demographic ageing of the society creates a lot of problems e.g. rise in the absolute number of aged people. Shown in Graph 1 [2].

Moreover, the rapid change in the demographic structure of societies determines the growth of financial burdens for healthcare system and growing costs of care for elderly people. It means that the need to develop preventive programs should be focused on maintaining the physical fitness and mental health of elderly people. It is advisable that designing these activities should be based on the recognition of socioeconomic situation of the senior environment, streamlining the organization of

their lives and catering for needs while maintaining fitness and mental health for years. Thus, “(...) the demographic change implies the series of economic, social, cultural and educational consequences, including - due to the growing participation of seniors in the social life - the need for professional educating of the specialists in interdisciplinary gerontology and the establishment of a system supporting elderly persons” [3].

Taking into account the increasing lifespan, and consequently the increasing retirement age, other measures serving demographers and economists can be introduced. The economy is worried by forecasts concerning future data which show that in 2035 a rate of elderly people will reach 23.5% [4]. Bearing in mind the reduced number of the whole population in our country, it will be consequently a heavy burden for the national economy. Therefore, after 2013 an economic burden of the old age will be greater than the costs of upbringing children and the youth [5].

In the current reality of the civilization progress, a view that population of older people constitutes the uniform group of infirm and dependant people is stereotyped and socially unjustifiable. One should take into consideration the diversity of elderly people generation, depending on the phase of the old age. It means that particularly in the early old age, a lot of people are still sound in body and mind, lead the active lifestyle as well as actively participate in the social life. It seems, in this perspective, that contemporary generation of young people can expect longer lifespan, the smaller strain with illnesses, independent functioning while maintaining the fitness which will undoubtedly result in the increased



Graph 1. The real and projected number of people over 65 years old as well as over 80 years old (given in millions) [2]

Source: own study on the basis of World Bank's data

activity in old age. However, without introducing required reforms in the social policy, the adverse social phenomena can emerge such as severe feeling of loneliness, ill health, the social exclusion, or the poverty. Progress of the ageing process of the society is already generating perceptible effects for the retirement benefit system, the public finance, as well as for health benefits and carer's allowances.

Subject literature in biological (influence of outside factors e.g. natural or cultural), psychological (influence of time on the person's personality and emotions) and social (as the withdrawal from the working life connected with the retirement) aspects explicitly identifies the old age and the ageing process with the most difficult stage of ontogenesis. One should appropriately prepare for this stage. Thus, numerous projects, conversion and activating actions are proposed. They all aim at improving the quality of life of seniors.

The crucial element which fundamentally determines the condition of the functional quality of elderly people is decided by their financial situation. Self-assessment of the standard of living (business-economic situation of individuals), is shown in Graph 2 [6]. It presents the average satisfaction of the seniors. However, it does not differ much from the opinions of the rest of the society.

The above data indicate that fundamentally 90% of elderly people live mainly on retirement benefits which give them the feeling of self-reliance. Income situation of this group seems formally satisfactory, however, it is not uniform. Differences in terms of income in households of the senior population cause diversified usage of these funds. Due to the high share of fixed expense,

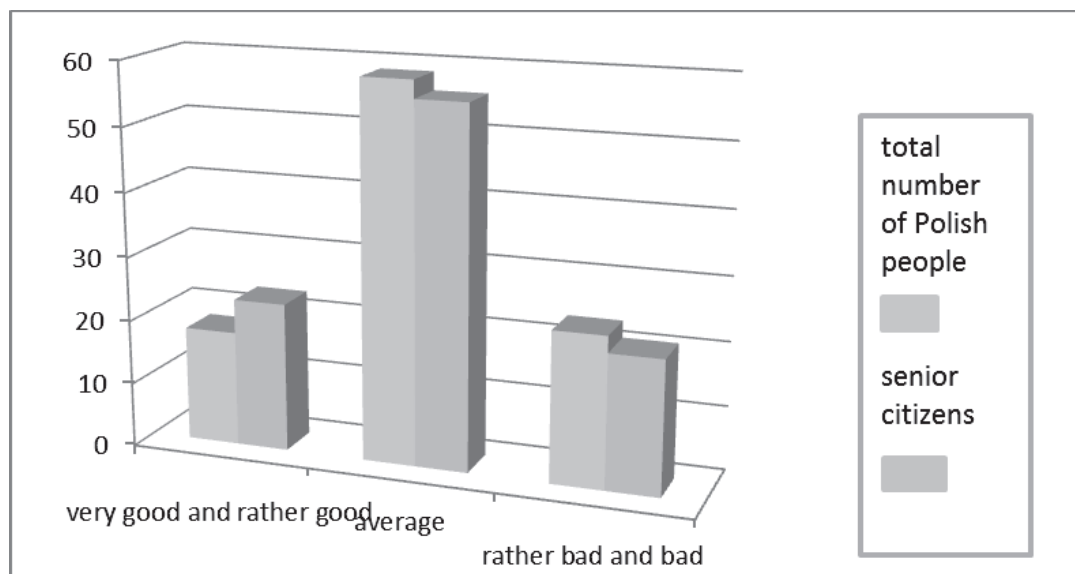
especially in the single-person households, elderly people have a disadvantageous structure of expenses. Flat maintenance and health-related expenses constitute the main and growing group [7].

Presently one must notice that expenses from so-called health group (i.e. treatment, rehabilitation, medicines) constitute the third position, after expenses on food and dwelling costs. It considerably reduces elderly people's financial possibilities. These possibilities are focused on self-education, the education or additional classes. Therefore, a tendency to worsen the income situation dependent on the ever greater age increases. That is caused not so much by the total income but rather by possibilities of its management. The main cause seems to be related to the restrictions that imply the need of support or care. Competent management of received income is a main issue aimed at satisfying the basic and important needs of elderly people.

The quality of life of elderly people will mean not only the guaranteeing them so called basic financial condition, but also realization of psychosocial needs i.e. the social usefulness, approval and the emotional bond. This is reflected in the feeling of social bond connected with the awareness of being needed and appreciated. It is translated into experiencing better and more dignified life.

The forms of elderly persons' continuing education

An education area of supporting the skills and knowledge is an integral element which influences the condition of the functioning quality of seniors. It lets them



Graph 2. Self-assessment of financial situation of senior citizens (data in %) [6]

Source: own study based on Central Statistical Office of Poland - Social Surveys and Living Conditions Department. Retirement

actively participate in social life. Continuing education contributes to sharing the experiences and to the intergenerational contact and constitutes the exceptionally important component of the active ageing. In this context, the Universities of the Third Age are a popular form of educating elderly people [8]. Their statutory purpose is the education of elderly people. In their scope of responsibilities, the Universities of the Third Age are focused on self-education, extending knowledge and the skills, getting to know the environment, as well as spending the free time and maintaining social bonds. It means that they support both seniors' intellectual development, as well as the social one. These universities serve the purpose of the continuing education and became a popular form of the gerontic education worldwide.

"Planning educational activities for elderly people should include diverse changes occurring in the period of the late maturity, including changes in the scope of social functioning, mainly concerning the reduction in the number of chances for establishing social contacts" [9]. Thus, apart from the Universities of the Third Age, more and more senior citizens' clubs develop. Elderly people meet in these clubs to integrate, adapt and activate. The above mentioned clubs are informal in their nature and are led by seniors themselves, although they can be supported by non-governmental organizations (e.g. community centres, housing associations or parishes). The seniors clubs are very often established in the vicinity of these non-governmental organizations.

All these forms of education and mobilization of elderly persons aim not only at proper adaptation to the period of the old age, but also simultaneously counteract widely comprehended ageism.

The support and the social activity in the area of functioning of the senior environment.

"Every man spends the old age differently. A diagnosis of the state of the needs of elderly people is a priority task that should be undertaken by the staff of social support system who work with the seniors. The needs of individuals assign the old-age-related tasks and obligations: supporting, animating, triggering the activity and accompanying the journey through the last years of life and they serve as the adjuster of social support" [10]. It means that the staff of the social support system is expected to be professionally prepared, creative, active and have the ability to communicate with the elderly people as well as understand them. Therefore, social work, in the context of the care for elderly people, should strive for identifying their problems and needs. It should also bear upon the better communication with the senior which will speed up the efficiency of the process. In this context, Kijak aptly notices that "(...) the purpose of

work for the benefit of seniors is an attempt to improve the quality of their life and to help them age with dignity through the public activation. The basic tool used in the completion of support tasks is a social work" [11,12]. Specificity of the social work for seniors consists in the lifelong endeavours to improve the quality of their life. Hence, taking into account the great diversity of seniors' groups, diversified level of their physical fitness and intellectual abilities, individualizing the forms of support becomes crucial. Seniors can apply for different benefits, allowances, refunds, attendance allowances, the purchase of equipment or going to the sanatorium.

Social Activity of Elderly People

Amongst crucial determinants of the seniors' quality of life, one should pay attention to the opportunity of their social activity. In response to the seniors' growing needs of becoming involved in this form of activity, the Government Program of the Social Activity of Elderly People was introduced [13]. It aims at improving the quality and the standard of living of elderly people as well as at providing the dignified ageing. This program offers the possibility of developing the social-professional potential of elderly people by their social activity in the scope of: education, the participation in the social, cultural and public life as well as the development and improvement of social service qualities for elderly people. Amongst other forms of the social activity for seniors one should distinguish popularizing voluntary services, supporting action for the benefit of self-help and self-organization and counteracting the marginalisation of elderly people.

"The concept of active ageing implies offering the possibility for the individual to be socially productive as long as possible. Social productivity is defined as every activity which produces goods and services, regardless if it is paid or not, including such activities as housework, babysitting, voluntary services, the help for the family and friends" [14]. Hence, the social activity of elderly people takes different forms, starting with the involvement in public benefit institutions, the Universities of the Third Age, senior citizens' clubs through to developing voluntary services.

Summary

1. The diagnosis of the life situation of the elderly people excludes the possibility of their marginalisation, the lack of care, respect, interest or development. The possibility of development and education as well as

- the seniors' involvement in various activities and actions constitutes significant element of the adaptation to the old age and its active experiencing.
2. The pejorative dimension of the last stage of the ontogenesis seems obvious and is associated with determined illnesses or the feeling of loneliness. However, there is a number of institutions focused on temporary and long-term support.
 3. The Universities of the Third Age or unofficial senior citizens' clubs are becoming more and more appreciated and well-known in the senior citizens' community. They develop and show the potential of elderly persons as well as the forms of both adaptation and activation possibilities.
 4. Due to the increasing percentage of elderly people in society, it is extremely important and topical to permanently touch on the subject focused on public functioning of elderly people and the development prospects of mechanisms of their public support.
 5. Public functioning of the senior environment defines it as the social capital which is inalienable in terms of experience, knowledge and commitment.
 6. There are many factors deciding over the quality of life in the late old age. However, it seems that the most important role is played by individual values, the perception of the world, making use of available opportunities and in the first place, as the undertaken diagnosis attempt shows, involvement in various forms of education-related and socio-cultural activities (including: continuing education and the development of one's own proficiency).
- Conflicts of interest**
None

References

1. Kijak RJ, Szarota Z. Starość. Między diagnozą a działaniem. Warszawa. Publikacja współfinansowana ze środków Unii Europejskiej w ramach Europejskiego Funduszu Społecznego: 2013, 5.
2. Source: own study based on World Bank data. (<http://search.worldbank.org/all?qterm=Life+expectancy&language=EN&format=html>), aktualizacja 20.04.2015 r.
3. Szarota Z. Kwalifikacje kadr gerontologicznych. Warszawa: CRZL: 2013. s. 6.
4. Szukalski P. Solidarność pokoleń. Dylematy relacji międzypokoleniowych. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2012. s. 25.
5. Walker A. The Economic 'Burden' of Ageing and the Prospect of Intergenerational Conflict. *Ageing Soc.* 2008;10(4):376-8.
6. Source: own study based on: GUS. Warszawa: Departament Badań Społecznych i Warunków Życia. Emerytura i renty w 2013 r.; 2014. s. 17-36.
7. Błędowski P. Starzenie się jako problem społeczny. Perspektywy demograficznego starzenia się ludności Polski do roku 2035. Poznań; 2012. s. 18-20.
8. Szarota Z. Przestrzeń edukacyjna Uniwersytetu Trzeciego Wieku. Warszawa: E-mentor 2008;3(25):71-6.
9. Bonk E, Bury-Zadroga M, Buszkiewicz K, et al. Edukacja osób starszych. Uwarunkowania. *Trendy. Mody.* Warszawa: Publikacja w ramach projektu „Metody edukacji osób starszych”; 2013. s. 35.
10. Szarota Z. Starzenie się i starość w wymiarze instytucjonalnego wsparcia. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego; 2010. s. 233.
11. Szarota Z. Era trzeciego wieku – implikacje edukacyjne. *Radom: Edukacja ustawiczna Dorosłych* 2014;1(84):7-19.
12. Szarota Z. Specyfika pracy socjalnej z seniorami – wybrane aspekty. Warszawa: CRZL; 2013. s. 42.
13. Rządowy Program na rzecz Aktywności Społecznej Osób Starszych na lata 2014–2020. W: *Monitor Polski. Dziennik Urzędowy Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej.* Warszawa 2014; poz. 52:2-49.
14. Szukalski P. Aktywność zawodowa. W: Błędowski P, Mossakowska M, Więcek A (red.). *Aspekty medyczne, psychologiczne, socjologiczne i ekonomiczne starzenia się ludzi w Polsce.* Poznań: Wydawnictwa Medyczne Termedia; 2012. s. 52.