

Deconstructing old age? On the evolution of social concepts of the late stage of life

Streszczenie

Główną tezą artykułu jest twierdzenie o znikaniu starości, rozumianej jako stan ze społecznie przypisanymi atrybutami, z przestrzeni publicznej. Starość zostaje wyparta ze świadomości społecznej, podobnie jak śmierć. Jej miejsce zajmuje procesualne ujęcie ostatniej fazy życia. W artykule omówione zostały społeczne uwarunkowania tej zmiany: przekształcenia rynku pracy, osłabienie systemu ubezpieczeń społecznych opartego na zasadzie solidarności, postępy medycyny, procesy indywidualizacji, zmiany kulturowe.

Słowa kluczowe:

dekonstrukcja starości, ludzie starzy, starość, przemiany społeczne

Abstract

The major thesis of the article is the fact that the old age – perceived as a definable and describable state – is vanishing from social space and being replaced by ageing; a process that can be controlled by man. It is the result of ongoing processes: not only ageing, but also more general social processes, such as changes in the job market, the weakening of the social security system based on the solidarity principle, progress in medical science, processes of individualization and cultural changes. Old age, just like death, is becoming eradicated from social awareness.

Key words:

deconstructing, old age, older people, ageing, the elderly, social transformations

1. Introduction

The fundamental thesis of this article may seem slightly disputatious, bearing in mind the title of the book and the great number of various initiatives undertaken, both scientific and non-scientific, with the term “old age” in their titles.

I am therefore trying to demonstrate that we are dealing with the deconstruction process of old age understood as a certain state or socially defined situation, with particular attributes, standing, status, and identity.

Just as the period of childhood, old age is determined mostly by demographical features and is connected with the biological processes of the body.

And just as children have their specified status, privileges and obligations, so are older people saddled with certain social expectations.

The fact that social expectations regarding the topic of the old age exist is expressed in such proverbs and sayings as, for example: “age is a heavy burden”, “old age never comes alone, but brings many illnesses along”, “youth is cheerful in bloom, old age is wrinkled in doom”.

It is difficult to define old age clearly. It is not an academic problem, but the social connotations are not very specific either. Despite these facts, people discussing old age assume some consensus as to the topic of their disputes (CBOS¹ 2009). When CBOS asked Poles if they think about their old age they did not have problems answering the question. Old age is the final stage of life. You enter it after experiencing all previous stages and with the awareness that there will not be any following stage. Unlike any other stage in life, old age is defined by processes of the living organism, with regard to the perspective of having a body; of the biological nature of our existence. Attempts at determining when the old age actually begins appear in literature in the form of thresholds described with respect to the following dimensions: biology, demography, economics, psyche, and social status, pointing mostly to the occurrence of certain processes characteristic of this stage in life (Szatur-Jaworska 2000). These facts influence the status of older people and social conceptualization of old age.

2. The social status of older people in the past – what do we know?

The place older people occupy in social space is determined by factors similar to those which determine the place of other members of a society. Social standing is connected with the privileges of prestige, access to goods, and power, defining its location in social structure and hierarchy (Ossowski 1982). Margaret Mead and her concept of three cultures connects the standing of older people with the role they play in cultural transmission. This role was of utmost importance in agrarian societies, in which changes occurred over a span of a few generations, and enculturative transmission took place in the form of a direct transmission. Older people, who upheld tradition and formed a personal legislative institution, enabled the societies to last (Mead 2000). But knowledge was not the only resource that guaranteed high rank in the structure of a family and community. Generally speaking, it was the control of resources necessary for maintaining order and survival of a society that defined the standing of older people (and not only older people). In Sparta, a *Gerousia* consisting of 30 elderly male members ruled the politics of the whole city. A similar role was performed by the Senate in ancient Rome, which also consisted of elderly men (Minois 1995). We know from history of some monarchs living to a grand old age. Louis XIV of France lived for 72 years,

¹ Public Opinion Research Center

Elizabeth I Tudor lived till the age of 70 and Frederick the Great died at the age of 74, similar to our Polish Wladyslaw II Jagiello, who was 72 at the time of his death. Among the ministers, chancellors and marshals appointed during the reign of Luis XIV, at least twenty were over 60 years of age when they took office (Bois 1996). In those times, power was personalized individually (Focualt 1998) and the long lives of the regnant enabled the survival and long-lasting of a society. "The office was not a matter of age but of individuality" (Bois 1996: 75). Back then, in the early modern period, age was not important when it came to serving.

The situation of older people was mainly dependent on their resources and health, which guaranteed secured living and independence. A lack of the aforementioned resources deprived people who were incapable of self-support, due to their old age and poor health, of stable grounds for social security, hence rendering them marginalized and excluded. For example, in the countryside old people tried to work for as long as they could and to be useful, because only then could they hold their position in the family and community. The owners of farms also tried to hold their ownership rights as long as possible and not pass them on to their successors. If this was the case, however, their social standing could have been altered dramatically at times. This is the reason for the custom, upheld until quite recently in rural Poland, of preparing a detailed contract, which specified the responsibilities and obligations of the successor towards their elderly parents or parent. The issue of legacy raised tensions among parents and children. Age enabled people to keep their resources under control and, thanks to the capital they worked for all their lives, it guaranteed access to goods. Young people were only at the beginning of this road. However, on the other hand, processes linked inevitably with the passage of time (such as illness or the death of a spouse) minimized the opportunities of using and managing one's resources. Older people attempted to postpone as long as possible the moment of passing on the ownership rights and the right to take decisions, since it amounted to the deprivation of privileges secured by those rights, and the lowering of one's rank in the family (Bois 1996, Piotrowski 1973).

3. The social security system and emergence of the old age

The industrial age brought along a major change in the position of older people. Previously, old age was not really clearly delineated. The social security and pension systems drew a clear line between working people and people not obliged to report for duty due to their old age. Thereby a clear line was drawn between productive and non-productive individuals. It also defined the symbolic beginning of old age in the social sense. Being a pensioner alters the status of an individual in a very distinctive manner. It also changes said individual's identity. It is therefore not a coincidence that all the criteria of old age assume their threshold point at the beginning of one's retirement.

Old age is present both in academic analysis and in social awareness. When CBOS asked Poles when old age begins, the respondents pointed to the age of 63 and above, which may be the mean value of two pension thresholds – 60 for women and 65 for men (CBOS 2012a). 65 is, or rather used to be, the ‘magic’ border which, once passed, marked the stage of old age with all its appurtenant attributes. When an individual finds him- or herself past this border, he or she becomes entitled to withdraw from the job market and to remain professionally passive; to change his or her form of operation and lifestyle. Becoming a pensioner used to be a ritual for entering the stage of old age. More or less official farewell celebrations at the workplace, where managers and/ or colleagues give the retiree gifts, bear all the traits of a ritual highlighting a change in social status. Since that very moment someone who hitherto had been an employee becomes somebody else – a pensioner; in other words somebody who, according to Znaniecki, deserves repose. The person’s absence from the job market, contrary to that of the unemployed, does not evoke allegations of idleness and living off other people (Znaniecki 1998). In the year 2000 a significant number of retired Poles remained resistant to accepting employment, arguing that “they did not want to work anymore as they had already worked enough throughout their lives” (Halik 2002: 49–50), so they had the right to rest. Passing time did not change much with regard to those statements, as the majority (69%) of pensioners surveyed by CBOS in 2012 were not willing to take a job, either (CBOS 2012b).

4. The fading dichotomy of a productive and non-productive stage in life

Late modern times are changing this state of affairs. It is reflected primarily in language. The elderly oust the old, also in scientific description. New terms are appearing, such as ‘the third age’ or ‘late adulthood’. The term ‘old’ used to describe a person is beginning to have a pejorative connotation and is best avoided. Right before our eyes social norms are changing, and referring to someone as old is imperceptibly starting to be seen as somewhat unfortunate and indelicate. Consideration given to old age is mostly defined by treating it as a social, demographic or medical problem; a problem that should and can be solved.

The disappearance of old age from social space is connected, generally speaking, with processes of social change; above all, with demographic processes. The average life expectancy in medieval times was 25 years; in the 19th century it was 45 (Trafiałek 2003). In the 1950s the average life expectancy in Poland was 62 years for women and 57 for men. Currently it approximates 72,4 years for men and 80,9 for women. Forecasts estimate that by the year 2035 the average life expectancy will rise to 77,1 for men and 82,9 for women (GUS² 2013a).

² Central Statistical Office

Between 1990–2000 the general number of Polish citizens rose by 1,2%. At the same time the number of people aged 65 and above grew by more than 20%. It is estimated that the number of oldest Poles will rise most rapidly. It is predicted that between 2007 and 2035 the number of people above 80 will double (GUS 2009). Old age is beginning to amount to a quarter of life. There are twenty years between the age of 60–65 and the age of 80–85. Factors differentiating the situation of sixty-year-olds and eighty-year-olds are becoming more important than their similarities. It has become increasingly challenging to treat them as one social category in profiles and analyses.

The ratio of individuals of productive age to individuals of post-productive age is beginning to change to the disadvantage of the working population. For every 100 individuals of productive age there are 26,9 individuals of post-productive age. In 2011 in Poland people of post-productive age constituted 17,3% of the entire society, which was close to the number of people of pre-productive age, who accounted for 18,5% (GUS 2013b). Growing concerns about the situation when working people will not be able to bear the weight of supporting the non-working has led to changes in the public pension scheme. The retirement age has been postponed. Regardless of further developments of the debate on pensions and what its outcome may be, one may assume that the borderline between one's job and retirement will simply disappear. Such a forecast is justified by job market observations. The growing flexibility of the job market not only makes it easier for the typical individual to change jobs, but also entails no continuity of employment, periods of unemployment, and illegal employment. Ulrich Beck argues that unemployment will cease to exist as a problem, as it will become a natural state; periods of unemployment will be present in most people's lives (Beck 2002). Simultaneously, we are under pressure, visible also in the government's politics, to undertake individual steps aimed at gathering resources which will secure our well-being when we are old. Seven principles described in a guidebook defining the direction towards which reforms related to the results of aging should be developed, endorsed by OECD, includes, inter alia, such statements as the ones below:

1. Public pension systems, taxation systems and social transfer programmes should be reformed to remove financial incentives to early retirement, and financial disincentives to later retirement.
2. A variety of reforms will be needed to ensure that more job opportunities are available for older workers and that they are equipped with the necessary skill and competence to perform these jobs.
3. Retirement income should be provided by a mix of tax-and-transfer systems, advance-funded systems, private savings and earnings. The objective is risk diversification, a better balance of burden-sharing between generations, and to give individuals more flexibility in their retirement decision (OECD 1998).

We can estimate with high probability that only few individuals will enjoy sufficient financial security to resign completely from gaining resources to support themselves at the age of 65 or 67. The borderline between being professionally active and withdrawing from the job market will blur. The majority of people will undoubtedly try to work for as long as possible. One third of Poles aged 18–45 declared in 2009 an intention to work after having reached retirement age (CBOS 2009). Even now, one out of ten pensioners is professionally active (CBOS 2012b). Resigning from work will become an individual's decision, dependent on many factors. Some will withdraw from the job market at the age of 67, others at 77, and others at 87. The ritual of crossing the border and starting the post-productive retirement period will disappear. The symbolic line signifying the beginning of the last stage of life called "old age" will vanish.

5. The social identity of older people or the liquid identity of individuals of various ages?

The progress of medical science and technology makes it possible to soften or even eliminate the negative consequences of ageing and disease. Cataract surgery and almost routine hip surgeries are only two examples of medical procedures undertaken on a regular basis and alleviating the limitations of the body that used to trouble older people in the past. An old age connected with disease, disorders, impaired agility and dependence on others is being postponed in time. When picturing their old age, respondents surveyed by CBOS expressed greatest fear of illnesses, disability and memory loss, but also of being a burden to others, loss of self-sufficiency and dependence on other people (CBOS 2012a). The former and the latter are closely related. The achievements of medical science make it less probable that the consequences of health deterioration linked to ageing will result in disability and dependence on the assistance of other people. Medical technologies (broadly understood also as medical equipment) such as glucose meters, blood pressure monitors and hearing aids increase the self-sufficiency of ill and old people. Old age, which always used to be linked with physical weakness, potential intellectual deterioration, changes in mental health and dependence on others, is being put off and reserved for late old age, when people are over 80 or even 90 years of age.

Withdrawal from the job market marked the beginning of decreased activity in other spheres of life. Old age meant consent for acting passive. In stereotypical imaginings of old age, two pictures dominated: an old age filled with disease and dependency, and an old age reaping the fruits of successful life (Miszczak 2006, Kawka 2006). In both approaches we observe an alteration in the degree and forms of being active. The post-productive period in life has traditionally been associated with an intensification of religious rituals, gardening, helping one's family (looking after grandchildren, household duties, etc.). Social regulations ordered retired people's lives and determined what kind

of activity was proper or not. It also used to apply to physical appearance. Not so long ago a woman turning 50 started to dress in black.³ Colour was reserved for the young ones. Nowadays jeans and sneakers are proper dress code both for the young and the old. Margaret Mead observed that living and functioning in post-modern times not only allows you to take advantage of experience and gained knowledge, but also requires that you learn continuously and adapt to a changing social and cultural environment. Technological development not only constitutes a change in the production realm, but is also connected with changes in the realm of social relationships and culture. Communication via electronic media introduces not only a new language but also habits and traditions, flattening distance (just think about the disappearance of formal headings such as “Dear Sir or Madam” and new impersonal forms of greetings that take their place, such as “Good morning” or “Hello”). The internet has become the major source of information, where you can learn about the opening hours of your nearest clinic and sometimes even make an appointment with doctors. It has become increasingly difficult to live without an online banking account or a mobile phone. Merely watching TV requires special skills connected with the seemingly trivial act of operating a remote control. Lack of such skills poses a threat of isolation to an individual. Goban-Klas uses the term illiteracy and directs our attention to the emergence of new criteria of social inequality related to knowledge and the ability to use new media (Goban-Klas 1999). Digital isolation affects mostly old people: only 14% of Poles aged 65 and above use the Internet (Czapiński, Panek 2013). Campaigns undertaken by decision-making bodies at various levels aimed at minimizing the negative consequences of such processes and preventing exclusion mainly takes the form of creating an active role for elderly people in society. Active aging is the fundamental idea defining campaigns undertaken within the scope of social politics. “The word «active» refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, and not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force. Older people who retire from work, are ill or live with disabilities can remain active contributors to their families, peers, communities and nations. Active ageing aims to extend healthy life expectancy and quality of life for all people as they age” (WHO). It is not only social politics and all institutions dealing with elderly people problems and aging that express such an expectation. Remaining active is extorted by social changes.

Collective identity always determines individual identity (Strauss 2013). Age, like gender, is an attributive feature that bears social meaning. When Maria Ossowska analyses ethical norms she begins by noticing the differentiation of social expectations towards people depending on their age (Ossowska 1986). The fact that retirement no longer constitutes a border crossing ritual makes it more difficult to mark the starting point

³ Information from my mother and other elderly people

for becoming a member of the category of “old people”. The border which, when passed, started to socially define individuals in different categories and which enabled individuals to perceive and define themselves in a new way, has become blurred and obscured; has ceased to exist. The way people dressed and behaved, and their forms of activity and daily routines were distinctively linked to their age. Social patterns and expectations defined what was generally accepted and desired, and in this way guided individual choices, simultaneously directing them towards fulfilling the social model of an old or ageing person. Nowadays there are no such clear road signs. Living in liquid modernity, as Zygmunt Bauman calls it, does not offer any clear guidance. Liquid modernity means liquid identities. All citizens of an increasingly changing and busy world face the challenge of self-construction (Bauman 1999: 47). Ulrich Beck argues that the law individuals follow today is this is me, and only later am I a man or a woman (Beck 2002: 164), which could be changed to this is me and only later am I a mature or old man or woman.

6. Ageing instead of old age

One of the elements of more general individualization processes is an undermining of the deep-rootedness in social space by affinity to the category of “older people”. It is the individual that holds all the rights as an individual citizen or an employee, and not because of belonging to a broader group, clan, class or nation. The basis for an individual identity’s definition of who an individual is for themselves and others (“I am a teacher”, “I am a mother”) is disappearing. However, the above self-construction is not an individual ‘I’ (Giddens 2001) in the very meaning of this word. An individual, like never before, as Beck states, cannot live a self-sufficient life but is entwined in a network of relations with the market, advertising and experts. Identity patterns are created by the market. In declining the assigned patterns, individuals may seemingly choose by themselves, thereby building their own identity. There are special programmes, projects, and organisations in the public sphere addressed at seniors, which offer them various forms of activity. Old age can no longer be passive; withdrawal into the private sphere is no longer a socially advisable way for older people to function. Active ageing is also the predominant message from the market and culture. Older people, in a much stronger sense than the young, must construct their identity with respect to their having a body and the way it functions; of having a body with physical appearance and agility. The message conveyed by health experts is also clear: remaining active is an effective way of delaying the ageing processes and keeping the body and mind agile and one’s health better. It also means an eagerness to learn new things; accepting novelties and adapting to a changing environment.

Upon analyses of changes that affect old age as a socially defined state, one must not forget that it means entering the final stage of life, followed only by death. Talking about

old age is a reminder of the existence of death. Yet, death has become a taboo in modern societies. It is absent from social space. Terms directly addressing death are being avoided. We say 'he left us' instead of 'he died'. We do wear mourning clothes. Nothing reminds us of the existence of death; of its inevitability. Our attention is directed towards the cause of death, which seems to be avoidable. According to Zygmunt Bauman, the modern period deconstructed death, and the post-modern period deconstructs immortality. There is no death as a social fact; there is only a biological event (Bauman 1998). Do we not observe a similar process with regard to senescence? I feel inclined to say that not only is there no death anymore, but there is no old age either. There is only ageing. "Ageing" focuses on the ongoing process leading to old age, but without a clearly defined ending; without pointing to when exactly this old age occurs. Treating old age as a process is obviously justifiable. A sixty-five-year-old man standing at the beginning of the road is very different from a ninety-year-old standing closer to its end. Their health condition, agility, family and social situation, and the problems they face are totally different. Nonetheless, it causes old age as a state or defined social situation to vanish. The ageing process can be delayed, the flexibility and dynamics of the process making it difficult to determine specific moments and features pointing to the existence of the state.

7. Conclusions

Are we going to see Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* come true – a book where people died without wrinkles and other symptoms of growing old? They were taken away before death so that others could not see them. Are we facing such a future? Being active and participation at various levels of social life obscures the borderline between adulthood and old age. It is a way of alleviating or even eliminating the results of the on-going process of aging, which allows for the negation of old age. Older people used to work for as long as possible, justifying their utility and therefore their existence. Zawistowicz-Adamska states in her pioneering work devoted to old age and older people that "the right to work is their right to live. Idleness portends death" (Piotrowski 1973: 252). Nowadays various forms of activity play a similar role. Maybe people will start to withdraw only when being active is no longer an option, or when they are forced to do so by social pressure. Far away from the mainstream of life, locked in specialized institutions and isolated, they will not remind others of old age. Is it the way it is going to be? Ulrich Beck believes that "long-term conflicts will be preside over «attributive» features, which, both now and in the past, are linked to race, skin colour, sex, ethnicity, (...) age [highlighted by I.T.] and disability. These sorts of social inequalities are «quasi-transmitted by nature» in the environment of advanced individualization and obtain a special organisational and political dimension. It is so because of their inevitability and persistence, their being in contradiction to the principle of success, their specific character and due to the fact that they are

directly recognizable” (Beck 2002: 150). On the other hand, perhaps Michel Maffesoli is right when he forecasts the end of the era of individualism and the beginning of a tribal epoch (Maffesoli 2008). Older people’s communal forms of living are in line with such a forecast (Niezabitowski 2007, Szlendak 2010, Grotowska 2011).

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