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Old age – roleless role or time of freedom

Streszczenie

Starość – wiek bez roli czy czas wolności?

Starzenie się społeczeństw jest dziś faktem, nie jest jednak jasne, jaki kurs obiorą społeczeństwa w odpowiedzi na to zjawisko. Prawdopodobnie do głosu dochodzić będą potrzeby ludzi starszych, wobec których nie pozostaną obojętne instytucje społeczne w każdej właściwie sferze – biznesu, pracy, usług społecznych (w szczególności zdrowotnych i edukacyjnych), kultury, religii. Niniejszy tekst jest próbą spojrzenia na ten proces w perspektywie jednego z elementów struktury społecznej – ról społecznych. Podjęta analiza miała za zadanie wskazanie kierunku przebiegających zmian. Wzięto pod uwagę kilka ról: opiekuna i podopiecznego, dziadka i babci, pracownika, członka wspólnoty religijnej oraz obywatela.

Słowa kluczowe:

wiek bez roli, role społeczne w starości, starzenie się, opieka w okresie starości

Abstract

Although today the aging of societies is a fact, it is not obvious which direction societies will take in facing the phenomenon. Most likely, the needs of elderly people will become more visible and social institutions will not stay indifferent and will provide help to those people in almost every area of life – business, work, social services (especially medical and educational), culture and religion.

This paper is an attempt to analyse this process from the perspective of one of the elements of social structure, i.e. social roles. This analysis was to indicate the direction of the above-mentioned changes. Several roles were taken into consideration, namely that of a caregiver and a charge, a grandfather and grandmother, a member of a religious community, and a citizen.

Key words:

roleless role, social roles in old age, ageing, care in old age

Aging not only means a challenge or a problem to be solved, but also points out directions of social change. Population aging results from human activity, i.e. from scientific, technical and medical development, and cultural and lifestyle changes. If the senior population constitutes 10–20% of a society, not only is the elderly people's presence more visible, but diversity and inequality among them can also easily be noticed.

In the personal dimension aging and old age involve changes of social status, roles, and self-identification. One of the first rules an individual learns in their socialisation process is to "act your age". This rule refers to social diversity in the context of age. It is

related to particular social roles available to a member of society as well as the way these roles are played in various life stages.

This raises questions about the place of senior citizens in society. Their place is defined by social roles. Do any roles referring to old age emerge as a result of demographic changes? How are social roles available to the elderly changing today? This paper aims at presenting a brief review of a basic repertoire of social roles intended for or available to elderly people, and of tendencies in the way those roles change.

1. Role configurations

Just like in other stages of life, the roles played by people in old age also indicate their social age. One's social age expresses social expectations related to specific ways of thinking, acting, perceiving the world, and being treated. These expectations are deemed correct and are disseminated as appropriate for the age in question (Szarota 2010: 42). Such expectations, norms, imperatives, and privileges generate differences related to aging, which are embodied in special social practices.

The appropriate age to undertake specific roles and behave appropriately to one's age is defined by a "social clock", typical for a given community, which constitutes a part of its tradition (Moody 2006: 2). Not always are social roles assumed intentionally; some are taken or lost involuntarily as a result of aging. Becoming the recipient of care as the result of the deterioration of physical strength and loss of economic independence is one such example (Szarota 2010: 42).

Some roles can be assumed only after having reached a particular age threshold, e.g. starting schooling, to exercising active and passive voting rights, obtaining a driving licence, retiring, attending a so-called third age university; others can or have to be given up after having reached a particular age threshold.

Yet some roles can be assumed at any age. One does not give them up when arriving at old age, although the related expectations and ways of fulfilling them change with ageing. In the course of time, the same roles change their forms, weaken or become intensified, and their importance for the individual's social status changes. This is well illustrated by a role of a mother of adult or even aging children in comparison with a mother of little children, or the role of an employee who, as a result of aging, is perceived as less and less effective, less well-educated and holding invalid qualifications, and whose deteriorating health causes problems, etc. Some roles can intensify and their position in the role repertoire can move to the centre, e.g. the role of a member of a religious group, association or local community, the role of a citizen, or that of a patient.

2. The gender gap and the problem of care

Aging is different for men and women. The most obvious difference concerns life span, which is longer for women – the Global Age Watch Index in 2012 indicated that there are 84 men to 100 women aged 60 years (p. 7). However, one can indicate many other features being different for the respective genders.

Women's numerical superiority involves differences in marital status. While elderly men remain married, most women are widows. More often, widowhood happens to women, since they live longer, marry older men, and thus have a lesser chance to remarry. Nevertheless, the consequences of such circumstances for the quality of life at an older age are ambiguous. Some of those who are single at an older age suffer from isolation; others do not. In many cases lonely people live close to their children and families, relatives or other people, as such ties effectively protect them against solitude. However, a lonely life can cause a worse socioeconomic situation, i.e. risk of poverty or social isolation. The spouse's or partner's presence is particularly important in the case of illness or senility, when the continuous support of a caretaker is essential. As a matter of fact, women face the necessity to help their husbands or partners more often than men. Although in modern society an important shift is taking place in relation to the caretaking role, which requires men to engage in housework and raising children, women still have to care for the rest of the family, i.e. their spouses, siblings, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Only daughters are required to take care of aging parents, as they perceive such care as part of their gendered role (Brandler 1998: 44).

But providing care is extremely stressful. It is easier to take on such a burden if the family ties are strong. On the basis of his own calculations J. Remr proposed a typology of caregiving, in which he took into consideration the approach to providing care (the caregiver's satisfaction) as well as the perception of the relationship between the caregiver and the charge. According to the quoted author, 34% of respondents declare caregiving accompanied by good relationships (mostly women and widows). Their assessment of their involvement in care giving was positive, even in the case of conflict with their charges. The second group of respondents (10%), composed mainly of people under 30 years of age and also those who were badly off, felt satisfaction in caregiving despite sporadic conflicts with their charges. The third group (24%) was composed of those whose decision to provide care was based on their relationship with their charges, although they did not experience caregiving satisfaction. This approach can often be observed in the case of men and of persons enjoying higher social status and revenue and having received a higher education. The last group (32%) decided to provide care for a family member, although they declared no satisfaction in being caregivers and no closer relation to their charge (Remr 2012: 212–213).

Like in other European countries, families in Poland are also responsible for providing care for senior family members. Elderly people appraise institutional efforts to

meet their tangible and intangible needs, as provided by governmental as well as non-governmental social services, as poor (Łangowska-Marcinowska 2010: 94–95). Yet, institutional care for the elderly in Poland is necessary for family, social, and housing reasons. According to experts (Karpiński 2008: 232, as cited in Rogala S. 2010: 127) the network of nursing homes which could provide dignified conditions to spend one's old age should be extended tenfold, i.e. from 30 thousand to 300 thousand places.

Elderly people play both roles related to care – they receive help (mostly men as care recipients) and they provide care (mostly women as caregivers, who take care of their parents, spouses and other family members, e.g. parents-in-law). The second role places a great burden on women.

Family relationships are assessed differently with respect to gender. Regardless of gender, senior citizens are satisfied with their grand- and great-grandchildren. In the case of marriage relations, however, men tend to explicitly evaluate their marriages as positive, whereas women may express disapproval (Halicki 2010: 229). The differences in evaluation may result from the fact that women (both daughters and wives) bear greater costs of care than men (Raschick, Ingersoll-Dayton 2004: 320–322). And in the case of aging daughters, their problems only pile up due to the burden of caregiving and ageing (Brandler 1998: 44). Moreover, caregiving is experienced differently by different family members, i.e. daughters, sons, wives, and husbands; generally speaking, children get greater satisfaction from being caregivers than spouses (Raschick, Ingersoll-Dayton 2004: 320–322).

The roles of care-recipient and caregiver are related also to the issue of care for the elderly provided by female support workers, mainly emigrants, who are employed legally or illegally in the countries of Western Europe and Nothern America (Tomassini, Lamura 2009: 83–85, Lutz, Palenga-Moellenbeck 2010: 421). The abovementioned data prove how far this phenomenon has spread: it concerns 18% of social care workers being employed in the UK at the moment, and over 50% of migrant workers in London in the system of care provision (Candiano, Shutes, Spencer, Lessen 2009: 1)[1]. In Germany, for instance, the number of employees providing social services has exceeded the number of employees in the automotive industry. And the German government is still planning to increase the employment of cheap care workers from Eastern Europe (http://www.dw.de/carers-outnumber-autoworkers-in-germany/a-5879436).

As Lutz and Palenga-Moellenbeck indicate, officially it is the family that cares for elderly people in Germany. However, in the public discourse this issue is described as an "opened secret", for family caregiving is a pretext for employing female migrants. This rift between the official and unofficial family ideology of care was mentioned by a journalist who described his experiences in a book entitled "Where to Put My Father?"

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[1] After the enlargement of the EU in 2004 Poland became one of the main country of origin for migrant-carers in the UK (13% of migrant-carers were born in Poland, also 13% in Zimbabwe, 12% in Philippines, 10% in Nigeria, 8% in India) (Candiano, Shutes, Spencer, Lessen 2009: 64).

in 2007. This publication triggered a discussion in the German media and disclosed that the care system for the elderly is in fact based on the work provided by migrants from Eastern Europe. It is worth noting that the book was published anonymously (Lutz, Palenga-Moellenbeck 2010: 422 and passim).

In Poland the care system for the elderly does not include migrant care workers and this distinguishes our country from the countries of the old European Union.

3. The age of freedom

In the 21st century, uniform concepts of the course of life for each and every person are fading away. In the very same society one can observe two opposing tendencies; on the one hand, educated and career-oriented women postpone the decision to have children until they are 35 or older, while on the other, teenage pregnancies are being recorded. Thus, a 35-year-old woman can be both a mother and a grandmother. In professional life it is possible to enter a new career path after 60, despite retirement. As these examples show, the course of life is becoming less predictable and the relation between specific social roles with age is diminishing (Moody 2006: 13).

Nonetheless, the social definition of old age is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it is believed that in old age everything is possible – professional work and retirement, parenthood and grandparenthood as well as establishing a (new) family. One's biography becomes uniform and particular stages of life, e.g. marriage, parenthood, or professional life do not coincide exclusively with a particular age, and the lifestyles of all generations become alike (Giddens 2009: 170–171). On the other hand, old age is described as a "roleless role". The most important social roles – family and professional roles – are created for people aged 30-50 and do not meet the social expectations of elderly people. The authority of guardianship that is typical for parenthood roles concerns guardianship over children under 20, and the related expectations of responsibility, control and socialization do not apply to the relationship between an adult and his or her elderly parents. As this example proves, old age deprives social roles of their attributes and power. A similar mechanism operates in the case of professional roles, which disappear or change and gradually stop being sources of power, respect, development, and social rewards after retirement (Hazan 1994: 41–42). In the literature on gerontology an explicit or implicit assumption is made that professional work is a basic type of human activity and a source of human identity. Life after retirement is described using terms such as "leisure" or "roleless role." The first term is used to highlight that retirees, in being outside the labour market, deal with the problem of keeping themselves occupied with sensible and meaningful activities (Shuldiner 1995: 248).

The term "roleless role" refers to the tendency to replace clearly specified and formalised social roles (e.g. that of an employee, spouse or parent) with informal roles

characterised by underspecification and fuzziness; e.g. the role of an employee is re-placed by the role of a user of free time.

Underspecification refers also to basic social institutions, in which the division of roles is not strict and the roles themselves are not precisely specified – this generates greater freedom and autonomy. Some experts emphasize the importance of this issue, claiming that old age is not determined by external requirements and restrictions. In this context, old age seems to be a time of more freedom rather than an age of no roles (Moody 2006: 21, Halicki 2010: 121).

It is important to highlight, however, that individualisation and the possibility of introducing innovation to social roles depends more on an individual's character traits, activity, and negotiation abilities. This means that nothing is determined unconditionally and once and for all. Social status, e.g. within a family, is won (and not achieved); thus, the role which has been won can be lost. As a result, old age is a "roleless role" espe-cially if one has no power and resources to continually "negotiate" one's status.

3.1. Family roles

Demographic changes have an impact on family structure. A longer life-span to-gether with a low fertility rate results in the occurrence of *beanpole families,* in which many generations live together. Such families are smaller (Dykstra 2010: 3), and con-temporary young people have more parents and parents-in-law than siblings. New so-cial roles appear, such as great-grandparents and great-grandchildren, along with new relationships such as grandparents vs. great-grandparents, great-grandchildren vs. great-grandparents, etc. The family is learning to live with new roles, its structure re-mains unspecified, and there is no answer available as to who is to take responsibility for what (Qualls 1997: 178). As Turner indicates, nowadays the roles of grandparents are changing into entirely new roles which entail occasional contact with grandchil-dren, toward whom grandparents are trying to act as good companions in fun rather than figures of authority. Whereas in the past grandparents were in charge of socialising the youngest generation, handing down family values and heritage, today's grandpar-ents put emphasis on playing with grandchildren, playfulness, and informality. There are various reasons for this change. However, it can be argued that the emphasis on the socialising role has decreased due to a conflict inside the family resulting from intergenerational differences in lifestyles. Moreover, the increasing number of divorces and the unclear role of grandparents (in terms of rights and responsibilities) when par-ents separate make it easier to give up the task of socialisation and focus on playing with children (Turner 1990: 101).

In Poland both academic literature (e.g. Czerniawska 1998: 17, Bieńkowski 2012: 88–89) and social mentality ascribe to grandparents the function of cherishing tradi-tion, the task of telling stories, instilling religious beliefs and a code of ethics, and

emotional engagement with their grandchildren (CBOS 2012: 5, CBOS 2008: 5–6). According to Hazan (1994: 43), it is typical for a grandparent to be emotionally involved but have restricted rights to decide about the grandchild's future. It is a relationship between a grandchild and a grandparent, i.e. a person whose social position is of marginal significance.

3.2. The role of an employee

Social time is structuralised in accordance with the time of paid work, which is the essence of human activity. The number of working hours and the work time schedule in an individual biography depends on social organisation, economic structure, technology, social conflicts, the conditions of social agreement, and institutions. Over the last century working hours in industrialised countries have been shortened (Castells 2007: 437) and the number of working years has decreased. This is accompanied by a stereotypical perception of older employees who are deemed burnt out, afraid of risk, exhausted, and mentally inflexible. In Sennett's opinion these superstitions are not accidental – their aim is to justify the pressure on older employees to retire. Older and experienced employees are less submissive and tend to be judgmental towards their supervisors in comparison to young employees. The professional experience and the knowledge about the company an employee has gained over the course of time can be deemed an obstacle, as opposed to a form of capital, by supervisors who want to introduce innovations (Sennett 2006: 126). Diversified strategies have been used with respect to various groups of employees on the labour market, as seen from a historical perspective. Older employees are tolerated only in periods of prosperity, in which case they are encouraged to postpone their retirement. But in a crisis or recession, as in the 1930s and 1970s, there is a tendency to push them out of the labour market in the belief that only younger employees can develop new skills and production methods (Davidson 2012: 32).

The biographies of contemporary pensioners present the typical capitalist professional experience: a basic social role which required a lot of their time and helped them to build their identity. Hence, retirement can cause numerous negative consequences such as a feeling of worthlessness not only in professional but also in social life, indifference, apathy and passivity (Łangowska-Marcinowska 2010: 86). Despite all of these risks, older employees in Poland exit the labour market before reaching the regular retirement age. Between 1990–2004 the professional activity rate among employees aged 50–55 decreased from 75.6% by 11 percentage points, and among people aged 55–59 it decreased by 15.8 percentage points to 40.6% (Kurkiewicz 2007: 190). Persistently high unemployment in Poland makes older employees seek refuge in retirement (between September 2012 and September 2013, the number of unemployed people aged 50 and over doubled in comparison to the total number of people seeking employment, i.e. by 10.2 % (Kowalski 2013)).

3.3. The role of a member of a religious association

In old age the role of a member of a religious association is of great importance. Old people's participation in church services and payer groups as well as pilgrimages develops their traditional religiosity (Halicki 2010: 74–75). Religious observances are a vital form of senior citizens' activity in organisation, although this does not mean that it is exclusively ritualistic religiosity. There is yet another dimension of institutional religiosity, namely the capability to produce social capital. Many authors noticed that religiosity supports civil participation through e.g. appeals to participate in elections or other forms of political activity in various ways (e.g. Verba, Schlozman, Brady 1995, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, Putnam 2008, Wuthnow 1994, Coleman 2003). The research conducted in Poland among senior citizens show that thanks to their membership in communities, organisations, and religious movements they acquire the necessary skills to maintain interaction within a group and through church structures (e.g. Caritas and missions) they undertake charity initiatives not only of local but also global scope. Religion and its institutions create a space in which senior citizens can play civil roles. The interested party itself perceives such activity as valuable – it broadens their horizons outside the limits of their privacy and everyday routine and allows them to engage in activity for a good cause (Grotowska 2011). Playing the role of a religious community member frees a person from a painfully experienced restriction – from a social space shrinking to personal matters and everyday routine.

3.4. The role of citizenship

The increasing power of the so-called grey lobby results from a particular important trait of elderly people, namely their civil activity. In the UK people aged 55 and over more actively participate in elections and shape legislative policy than young people: 33% of people aged 65–74 contacted a local councillor or a member of parliament in comparison to 13% of people aged 25–34 and 4% of people aged 19–24. Senior citizens' involvement is not restricted to traditional policy: baby boomers participate in consumer organisations more often than members of other generations (Davidson 2012: 4). In Poland, however, the relation between age and electoral participation is curvilinear – in 2007 such participation was most important (76. 9%) for people aged 56–65, but the participation of people over 66 had decreased to 68.4% (Polish General Electoral Study). Elderly people are also the least active in the public sphere. For instance, 6.9% of those over 65 shared their opinion with local authorities on issues of importance to the local community and 7.7% took part in meetings, whereas 72.9% declared having no influence on public matters and 45% as having no interest in them (Krajewska, Sobiesiak 2012: 5–6). Similar tendencies can be found in charity and volunteer work. Generally speaking, Poles are one of the least active nations in Europe. 12% of people over 55

declare involvement in public matters, whereas the average in EU countries is 27% (however, European involvement is highly diversified, being highest in Iceland at 64% and lowest in Portugal and Greece at 4%) (Pazderski, Sobiesiak-Penszko 2012: 14). In Poland the level of volunteering is relatively low, despite the fact that undertaking such activity in old age contributes to a higher quality of life. Volunteering is important for personal development, as it forms new traits of character in an individual, such as openness to people, courage to act and take responsibility, determination, self-confidence, etc. Moreover, it helps people in following the structuralisation of time into days, weeks and months, and motivates participants to cope with daily life (e.g. getting up in the morning and taking care of themselves); it provides a support structure in keeping oneself psycho-physically fit (Błachnio 2012: 142).

4. Final remarks

Although today the aging of societies is a fact, it is not obvious which direction societies will take in facing the phenomenon. Most likely, the needs of elderly people will become more visible and social institutions will not stay indifferent and will provide help to those people in almost every area of life – business, work, social services (especially medical and educational), culture and religion. The above-mentioned demographic tendencies enforce transformations in social structure which will meet the needs of senior citizens, who are becoming more and more visible in society. And their needs, which are so different from the needs of children and young people, will be better articulated and universal, and will require that society makes an effort to meet those needs (Dyczewski 1994: 10).

This paper is an attempt to analyse this process from the perspective of one of the elements of social structure, i.e. social roles. This analysis was to indicate the direction of the above-mentioned changes. Several roles were taken into consideration, namely that of a caregiver and a charge, a grandfather and grandmother, a member of a religious community, and a citizen.

The demographical processes and the accompanying social changes are taking place in a particular economic, political and social context, also being the subject matter of the research conducted by Global Age Watch Index 2013. 91 countries were classified for the sake of this undertaking according to such criteria as economic welfare and the quality of life of old people. Poland was 62nd, between Venezuela and Kyrgyzstan and much closer to the countries of the Third World than the old EU (excluding Greece) or Nothern America. For this reason I omitted the role of a consumer in the discussion, since I decided that this role is not very important for Polish senior citizens.

The social roles which the elderly people can assume are generally available (with a few exceptions) to all members of society. But it is typical for half of the analysed

roles undertaken in old age to be unclearly formulated and ambiguous. And the related imperatives and bans are now less strict. Thus, such roles lose their characteristic scope of responsibility and power and their social importance and function. This pertains to e.g. the roles of parents, grandfathers and grandmothers, and employees. Although individuals have the possibility of negotiating the way he or she will play them, it is possible only in special cases to win a social position equal to the position of younger generations.

Nevertheless, the analysed roles include three which maintain and even gain greater importance in early old age. The first is the role of a caregiver with respect to one's own parents, parents-in-law or spouse. This role is usually assumed by women and is a significant burden.

The second role is that of a citizen is manifested in a growing participation in political and social life, although Polish senior citizens do not show particular activity in this area. This attitude may result from their difficult material situation, poor health, and low education level.

Institutional religiosity, which provides a space for expression and social involvement in one's cultural environment, gains more importance in old age. The role of a religious community member, on the one hand, is clearly defined by a religious institution, and on the other, it provides the autonomy to choose from available institutions. In religious institutions old age is not deprived of its role and meeting social expectations is not much of a burden.

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