

SOCIAL ACTIVITY OF SENIOR CITIZENS – SOME SOCIOLOGICAL REMARKS ON THE ISSUE

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Purpose: The aim of the paper is to discuss the issue of social activity of senior citizens from the perspective of sociology and social gerontology.

Design/methodology/approach: The barriers of social activity experienced by elderly people as well as its amenities are presented in the order of the SWOT-like analysis. The main issue has been discussed within the scope of gerontology. Psycho-social and sociological theories has been applied to distinguish two levels of potential factors of social activities of senior citizens: individual level and the level of society.

Findings: As a result of discussion in the summary author the role and the connection of theory and research in the practice of providing the opportunities for social activities of senior citizens. The special role belongs to action research which directly lies in between science and practice, the surveys which provide knowledge about scale of the problems and forms of activity of elderly people whereas longitudinal studies indicate the changes in attitudes and the modes of activity in the life course of aging individuals.

Originality/value: The paper combines and puts in order the scientific arguments concerning chances and factors hindering social activity of senior citizens. It is addressed to sociologists, social workers and some other specialists in the scope of social sciences and practical professions dealing with the issues of elderly people.

Keywords: elderly people, social activity, sociological theories, social gerontology.

Category of the paper: in between viewpoint and conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

There used to be some moments in history when older people gained very special importance in societies due to demographic changes across the country or continent. One of such moments was the turn of the XIV and XV centuries in Europe. As a result of epidemic of plaque and high mortality rate mostly among young people and children the populations of older people grew a lot in several countries like e.g. England, Italy, Germany, France or Spain. Among the consequences of this dramatic phenomenon were increase of

authority of older people in families, especially when it came to teaching the profession, exacerbation of intergenerational conflicts, the concentration of material assets (property) and power in the hands of the elderly (Minois, 1995).

So as the analyses of historians and demographers proved changes in population structure according to age can result in a completely different social status of given age group – in this case – of elderly people.

As regards to the turn of the XX and XXI centuries and next few decades a demographic aging of population of European countries is a social fact with many consequences. Earlier, especially in between 1940s and 1980s, growing awareness of this process contributed to the rise and dynamic development of modern social gerontology as an interdisciplinary field and then sociology of old age with their theories, concepts, research and predictions. One of the subjects of the explorations, investigations and analyses within social gerontology and sociology of aging are very complex issues of activity and social participation of elderly people. The observations and some research allow gerontologists to predict that social activity of senior citizens is still growing phenomenon. The chances of the development of that phenomenon will be discussed in this text referring to the sociological and gerontological theory.

2. Chances of the growth of social activities of elderly people

When debating chances of rising the social activity of elderly people the logic of SWOT analysis will be applied, which includes: 1) strengths, 2) weaknesses, 3) opportunities, 4) threats. Discussing strengths and weaknesses I am going to focus on such psychological traits of elderly people as individuals and social category which enable them to participate in social activities or limit this participation. When discussing opportunities and threats I will present some aspects of sociological perspective on atmosphere surrounding senior citizens in society.

2.1. Strengths of older adults in the light of gerontology

As regards to strengths I consider some theories, qualities and facts worth mentioning as a very important context of willingness to remain active despite being old or process of aging.

I am going to focus on theories below:

1. Theory of Activity.
2. Theory of competence.
3. Theory of continuity.

According to activity theory when remaining active as it used to be at middle age people become satisfied with their life despite their old age or aging process. Within this theoretical frame it was also obvious that lowering level of activity compared with this in one's middle age

resulted in dissatisfaction. This conviction is based on the famous researches conducted by Cavan and his coworkers, e.g. Havighurst (Cavan et al., 1949), nevertheless the theory of activity itself had been developed by Robert Havighurst. As activity is considered as necessary condition of successful aging it is worth mentioning that these two authors (researchers) included social interactions in clubs and associations in their inventory of attitudes being indicators of a said successful aging (Havighurst, 1963). This paradigm proposed by the aforementioned researchers only indicates that activity in old age is essential for life satisfaction at that stage of one's biography (or life cycle).

In turn, continuity theory not only assumes that our activity is just a continuation of one which use to be the case when we were at middle age. It also suggest that when adapting to our aging and to its consequences we tend to continue (follow) the patterns previously applied when we were at middle age. It primarily means that we use our resources to cope with problems and challenges in everyday life in late years. So the key term of this theoretical view on aging is adaptation (Atchley, 1972).

Another very important social theory in gerontology which shows the significance of activity is theory of competence (Halicki, 2000). It is focused on challenges that can be taken up by older adults. It can mean coping with activities of everyday life despite difficulties as well as learning new things and discovering new skills, talents and hobbies. The viewpoint of this theory, which is in contrast to a disengagement theory, inspired the development of Universities of the Third Age in several European countries like Great Britain, France, Germany etc.

The very significant contribution to the recognition of activity issues regarding elderly people in Poland has made nation-wide project PolSenior (Mossakowska, Więcek, and Błędowski, 2012). As it was stated in previous gerontological research (Synak, 2003) lack of satisfactory activity as well as social contacts and ties after retiring are the problems very often experienced by Polish senior citizens (Halicka, and Halicki, 2003). The above mentioned last nation-wide research PolSenior proved that the higher the level of education of respondents from the cohort 55-59-year-old the higher the coefficient of professional activity and employment. The conclusion drawn from this fact by some Polish gerontologists is that social policy in further decades should give possibilities for senior citizens to maintain professional activity but as a part time job (Szukalski, 2012). The other significant result of this research is the fact that the older respondents are the more often they feel lonely (Szatur-Jaworska, 2012b).

2.2. Weaknesses of older adults and their psycho-social aspects

Regarding the weaknesses which can limit activity of older adults I am sure that few facts and theories has to be emphasized. I mean first of all:

1. Disengagement theory.
2. Deficit model.
3. Portend of embarrassment according to Steven J. Miller.

4. "Social breakdown syndrome" described by Jack Zusman (see Synak, 1999) – problem which occurs in social interactions of older adults and has the permanent impact on their self-esteem and some other features of their self.

One of the first scientific perspective on the old age within gerontology is focused mostly on the processes of weakening older person and it is a deficit model (Halicki, 2000). So this viewpoint is concentrated on losing some resources, not gaining new ones. A disengagement theory (Cumming, and Henry, 1961) which is a very traditional theory in the scope of gerontology fall within the deficit model. According to this theory aging process lies in three basic kinds of withdrawal from life (Cumming, and Henry, 1961; Synak, 1999; Zych, 1999; cf Niezabitowski, 2007):

1. Gradual decrease in social interactions.
2. Weakening of emotional bond with the outside world.
3. Decrease in the level of conformity with social norms in their country.

This three signs of withdrawal Cumming and Henry considered as characteristic of the process of human aging and the adaptation to its biological inevitability is a necessary condition of optimal course of that process. So for these researchers the abovementioned manifestations of disengagement were normal which means that according to their opinions older adults want to withdraw from life and social activity not only in terms of interactions but also in terms of conformity and emotional bond with the outside reality. In that form this theoretical perspective stoked much controversy among scientist in the field of gerontology, because it so difficult to agree that such a level and scope of disengagement is a sign of normal aging process.

This level and scope of course depends on the individual, so one want to withdraw to a great degree whereas some other want to remain active or even discover new fields of activity. Furthermore it was also accentuated by some gerontologists that older adults who could have been active in some spheres may experience barriers of different kind, also socio-psychological. One of such barriers has been discovered and described by Steven J. Miller as a "portend of embarrassment" which means a fear of being treated as boring and grumpy old retiree who has nothing interesting to do in his free time. That kind of fear stops retired person from engaging in social activities and is a stigma on one's self formed as a result of so called "embarrassing encounter" (Miller, 1965). This term mean the event in which retired person has been treated as it was described above – someone unadjusted to the rest of society and uninteresting.

The other theoretical model of a process in which something abnormal happens to older adult is a "social breakdown syndrome" characterized by Jack Zusman (see Synak, 1999). It describes pathological process of decline in self-esteem and some other psychological qualities of older person as a result of being stigmatized due to being treated as a dependent human being in relations with help givers. The very important reasons for such a process is the formation of specific "psychosocial void" around older person as a consequence of (Kuypers, and Bengtson, 1973):

- The lose social roles and positions subjectively meaningful for a senior.
- The lose of social identity.

The void formed in that way makes elderly people a subject to two subsequent processes:

- Gradually becoming dependent from identities imposed by other people.
- Gradual adjustment and taking the role of dependent person if this role is imposed in subsequent acts of stigmatization¹.

There are two noticeable mechanisms of above mentioned “social breakdown syndrome”: stigmatization and susceptibility to such acts of stigmatization due to e.g. bad financial situation or inaccessibility of some other goods (social position, prestige etc.).

This means that objective social and economic situation of elderly people may be a threat to their dignity, especially when they lose their independence when losing their physical efficiency.

2.3. Opportunities – psychological and social aspects in the light of gerontology

The strengths and weaknesses analyzed above are only positive or negative potential of social activity of older persons. Moreover they are proposed potential strengths and weaknesses, not necessarily real. It depends on social, law and political circumstances if these strengths and weaknesses become real chances of stimulating activity (activity which is needed by seniors).

When discussing the opportunities of social activity of elderly people it is worth showing that in contrast to the weaknesses of older adults they also have evident resources predisposing them to activities in some spheres of life.

Some theoretical perspectives and facts accentuate such resources and chances to activate them. One of these perspectives is the concept called Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) which resulted from Berlin Aging Study (Baltes, and Carstensen, 2003). The practical implication of this concept is that despite some deficits senior citizens can reach life satisfaction based on the resources which they still have.

The other chances to prevent some risk of lowering the quality of life of elderly people are exposed in “Social reconstruction model”². These are the features of social atmosphere surrounding senior citizens (as individuals and as a group) like e.g. (Bengtson, 1973):

¹ I discussed some aspects of „social breakdown syndrome” in: Niezabitowski, M. (2020). Prawa osób starszych – kilka uwag z perspektywy gerontologii społecznej. In: A. Kuzior (Ed.), *Globalne konteksty poszanowania praw i wolności człowieka. Współczesne problemy i dylematy*. 12 (pp. 197-211). Gliwice: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej.

² I discussed some aspects of „social reconstruction model” in: Niezabitowski, M. (2020). Prawa osób starszych – kilka uwag z perspektywy gerontologii społecznej. In: A. Kuzior (Ed.), *Globalne konteksty poszanowania praw i wolności człowieka. Współczesne problemy i dylematy*. 12 (pp. 197-211). Gliwice: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej.

1. Breaking them free from “productive” social roles and understanding the need and right to individual, preferable, pleasurable lifestyles.
2. Improving housing, health and economic living conditions.
3. Giving elderly people an opportunity to control their lives, activities and solutions favoring the quality of their lives.

The above mentioned postulates concern social policy and the rights of older people written in some documents of that policy like for example Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (United Nations, 2002; Szatur-Jaworska, 2012a). As some of these rights are only written not necessarily followed by institutions it may mean that senior citizens are compelled to fight for their rights on their own. The theory of subculture of the aging emphasizes such possibility (Rose, 1965). Indeed, as the specificity of problems concerning older people are not satisfactorily included in overall social policy of Poland, a special policy, called aging policy has been “invented”, introduced and implemented by some legislation acts.

2.4. Threats as a social atmosphere surrounding elderly people

As threats to the development of social participation of elderly people are concerned one of the first sociological intuitions related to this issue is modernization theory specially adjusted to social gerontology (Cowgil, and Holmes, 1972; cf Synak, 1999). According to this perspective modernization of societies with its technological advancements, formation of new professions, expansion of new mass-media etc. decreases position of elderly people as their knowledge often becomes obsolete. This issue is even defined in terms of change of system of culture by American anthropologist Margaret Mead. She stated that when the knowledge of older people, also in the role of worker becomes outdated they stop being authority for younger generations in the societies of permanent change (Mead, 2000, cf 1978), which really means information societies (Castells, 2000; Krzysztofek, and Szczepański, 2002). According to Mead retiring older workers in organizations and substituting them with younger ones is a tool of enabling the organization to respond adequately to change. It is very difficult to agree with this statement as older workers also have some significant qualities emphasized mostly by the theory of competence mentioned earlier. So it should be clear that this radical view is based on stereotype of older people. The content of this stereotype includes such features like e.g.: outdated knowledge, reluctance to any change and learning new skills, gaining new competences etc. Such stereotypes strengthen ageism as an attitude which becomes rationale for an institutional common practice of the rejection of candidates for jobs at the age over 50 and 60 or withdrawing them from positions and tasks they need and are competent to do.

Ageism which lies on the view that older people are weak and old-fashioned and useless in terms of economy is one face of the issue of impediment to their social participation which is in accordance with their needs. Such view of this age group as a whole supports and justifies no efforts made to create offer or adjust institutions for their needs.

The other facet of the issue of ageism are the practices based on the conviction that the elderly are lonely, ill, inefficient, handicapped, depressed, passive, dependent, in need of permanent help and care. The conviction that all old people are such is of course a stereotype. However some senior citizens are in such situations. Then, indeed, they need help, support and if despite such limitations they want to participate in some activities it is worth recognize their needs and limitations to create offer well-adjusted to them. The offer specially adjusted to them can prevent these people from being painfully and depressingly isolated, excluded from the rest of society, local community and their peers. I think that this also refers to seniors living in nursing homes. Living in such a place shouldn't mean that people can be cut from the rest of the outside world.

3. Summary

To summarize the discussion above It has to be said that according to the logic of the SWOT analysis elderly people encounter some barriers of their social participation as well as facilities. Thinking about weaknesses it is worth focusing on the barriers of individual, mostly psychological, not necessarily related to health problems. This kind of barriers lie mostly in what kind of attitude towards themselves older adults expect. These imaginations (predictions) as I discussed earlier can make them abstain from social activities. As regards to strengths, the resources that older people still have despite losing their physical efficiency are crucial. These resources are emphasized by psychological and sociological theories in the scope of gerontology – for example by the concept of Selective Optimization with Compensation mentioned earlier.

As opportunities and threats to social participation of elderly people are concerned I think it is worth analyzing them at a broader social level. It means that actions planned and taken by the agendas and institutions of society should create chances to overcome barriers and activate resources of elderly people as individuals and as a group in different social contexts.

Such actions should deal with the issues like e.g.:

1. Isolation, marginalization, exclusion of the elderly.
2. Stimulating the intergenerational integration – by e.g. organizing meetings concerning the history of a local community or region.
3. Fighting with gerontophobia by inter alia popularizing positive images of old age and old people, for example showing senior citizens having their hobbies or some other pleasurable activities of leisure time.

4. Ageism in the job market and in other spheres of social life – one of possible strategies can be offering a job training at Universities for elderly people if they need it and showing positive examples of activities organized by seniors and for seniors which turned out to be fruitful for community they live in.
5. Fighting with negative stereotypes – like the stereotype of a boring retiree or only and always lonely, ill, inefficient, handicapped, depressed, passive, dependent, in need of permanent help and care, grumpy old man (crinkly) – in this case creating opportunities for participation in caregiving or some other forms of volunteering *inter alia* can be a good strategy.
6. Fighting against ghettoization – which means cutting special areas of space and social life which gather older people from the rest of society; it can also refer to cutting old people living in nursing homes from normal life outside the facility – in this case activities wanted by seniors and organized with their participation and moreover attractive for younger people can be a good strategy.

As regards to inclusion of the elderly in a local community there were some action research studies concerning this issue in Poland (Czekanowski, 2000; Halicka, and Pędich, 1997; Klimczak, and Nowalska-Kapuścik, 2019; Witkamp, and Meerstra, 1995). This kind of research were focused on organizing activities for senior citizens of given district of a town after recognizing their needs. When activities organized were performed the researchers studied (mostly by surveys) what were their benefits and drawbacks (disadvantages) perceived by the subjects of these actions – senior citizens themselves. The last stage of that kind of research becomes an evaluation of organized activities.

If the diagnosis of situation of elderly people in Poland has to be provided the large-scale surveys become a necessity. Such research show forms of activity of the elderly and types of their problems concerning the scale of these issues. Such research provide very useful information for social policy, even if that information is incomplete and has to be supplemented by further and deeper analyses. The tradition of such research in Poland hails back to 1960s (Piotrowski, 1973; Synak, 2003) and has been being continued for subsequent decades till the PolSenior project (Mossakowska, Więcek, and Błędowski, 2012). As it was concluded from Polish above mentioned researches there should be more opportunities for Polish retirees to participate in a job market. Such demand has also been articulated by some international organizations dealing with the issues of active aging. The idea of having opportunity to work as long as one wants in societies in which people live longer was put forward by e.g. “Active Ageing” European Union Policy (Fernández-Ballesteros, 2008).

The above mentioned types of research lie in between science and practice, so they are directly fruitful for that practice. One of the research which provide us with a lot of scientific knowledge about mechanisms of activity of older adults as individuals are longitudinal studies which also have tradition in gerontology. In this kind of research the same persons are studied, mostly interrogated, several times, in intervals of given amount of years. This method gives

possibility to observe and encompass processes and changes that occur in attitudes and activities of researched persons. Due to that kind of studies there is a widely held view among gerontologists that activity in old age is a necessary condition of a wellbeing and it should be adjusted to the personality and individual needs of a senior citizen. It has been clearly confirmed at least in a study conducted in the years 1990-1996 on a sample of 1537 elderly people who were involved in 16 kinds of activities, mainly arranged outside and having societal and social character (Coenen-Huther, Menec, and Synak, 2001; cf Halicka, and Halicki, 2003).

All in all to create opportunities for organizing activities adjusted to the needs of senior citizens there is a need for many actions based on knowledge driven from theory and research of different kind also research in between science and practice.

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