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Self-creation of Older People in the Perspective of Developing Wisdom and Adaptation to Changing Roles in the Family and Society

Abstract

Old age is a stage of life during which a person must confront the changes that occur both in the reality around them and in themself. Those are changes at the biological, psychological and social levels. Adapting to old age and the roles it brings becomes a difficult and demanding task. One of the most important developmental tasks of an elderly person is developing wisdom that can support and facilitate the process of adaptation to old age. Entering the period of late adulthood is therefore a special opportunity for further development and self-creative action of the individual leading to the creation of a mature identity of an old person. The aim of this text is to provide insight into the meaning and manifestations of this self-creative involvement, with particular emphasis on its importance in the process of adaptation to changing roles in old age and building wisdom.

Keywords: old age, adaptation, self-creation, wisdom, transcendence.

Autokreacja osób starszych w perspektywie rozwijania mądrości i adaptacji do zmieniających się ról w rodzinie i społeczeństwie

Abstrakt

Starość jest etapem życia, podczas którego człowiek musi się konfrontować ze zmianami, które zachodzą zarówno w otaczającej go rzeczywistości, jak i w nim samym. Mowa tu o zmianach na poziomie biologicznym, psychologicznym i społecznym. Adaptacja do starości i ról, jakie ze sobą niesie, staje się zatem zadaniem trudnym i wymagającym

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zaangażowania. Jednym z najistotniejszych zadań rozwojowych osoby starszej jest rozwijanie mądrości, która może wspierać i ułatwiać proces przystosowania do starości. Wejście w okres późnej dorosłości stanowi zatem szczególną szansę na dalszy rozwój i autokreacyjne działanie jednostki prowadzące do tworzenia dojrzałej tożsamości człowieka starego. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest rozumiejący wgląd w znaczenie i przejawy owego autokreacyjnej zaangażowania, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jego znaczenia w procesie adaptacji do zmieniających się w starości ról i budowania mądrości.

Słowa kluczowe: starość, adaptacja, autokreacja, mądrość, transcendencja.

Introduction

Change is an integral part of human development. Each stage of life has unique characteristics and each brings with it the need to adapt to changes. These changes can be of a universal nature: they then relate to the understanding of life stages as a common population experience for all people, as well as individual in nature, and refer to biographical experiences, largely of personal ways of coping with the challenges that life brings (Boyd, Bee 2007). Until the middle of the 20th century, old age was still seen as the culmination of the development process and not as a stage. This was due, among other things, to the fact that changes in late adulthood are predominantly regressive in nature at the biological level. Beyond the purely biological aspects of development, it has increasingly been viewed as a lifelong process that requires constant adaptation to changing abilities, personal goals, and the demands of the social world (Dubas 2009). In addition, older people's ability to accept and actively adapt to change has been found to be associated with an increase in their quality of life (Błaszczak 2013). From this perspective, old age appears as a space for special self-creative activity, allowing individuals to better understand themselves as an aging person, and as another important phase in the process of developing a mature identity (Dubas 2013). In this context, I understand self-creation as the co-formation of one's own identity through autonomous actions and decisions (Pietrasiński 2009; Wąsiński 2018). Due to the dynamism and complexity of the process of working on oneself, which shapes the subject's self-image, self-creation is of crucial importance in the process of dynamic formation of a person's attitude to the environment. This process promotes the reduction of tensions associated with a feeling of hostility or alienation toward the surrounding reality and is therefore adaptive in nature (Straś-Romanowska 1992). Changes with age take place both in the environment and in the individuals themselves. We are talking about changes on a biological, psychological and social level. Entering old age is a situation of changing self-perception in the context of ceasing to play existing social roles, but also taking on new roles in the family and wider circles of social life. Some roles come to an end completely, others change their character, and others are just emerging. Adapting to a new life situation therefore becomes a special developmental task of late adulthood (Straś-Romanowska 2020). Another important task is the development of wis-

dom, which supports the process of understanding one's own life and accepting its course (Pietrasinski 2009). It is not difficult to see that both tasks have a common denominator, namely the self-creative participation of the individual aimed at the formation of the identity of an old person. The purpose of this text is to provide an understandable insight into the meaning and manifestations of this self-creative engagement, with particular emphasis on its relationship to the process of adaptation to age and the roles associated with it.

Self-creation as the pursuit of subjectivity

Maria Dudzikowa (2007) describes self-creation as the pursuit of subjectivity. The author recognizes that "self-creation is an indicator of human subjectivity" (Dudzikowa 2007: 185) and refers to an understanding of it as previously proposed by Krzysztof Korzeniowski (1983). From this perspective, subjectivity consists of three fundamental aspects. The first is the subjective action of the individual, that is, the ability to influence the surrounding reality or oneself. The second aspect of subjectivity is awareness of the direction of subjective action, and the third is the specificity and autonomy of the individual, which allows them to rely on his individual system of values and meanings to determine this direction of action. A special type of actions of an individual that testify to their subjectivity is the attribution of meanings to the surrounding reality and their own existence. These meanings arise in the process of confronting external events and one's own behavior with the individual's system of criteria and values, and the result of this process can be both a feeling of pride and fulfillment and a feeling of shame or insecurity (Korzeniowski, 1983).

Writing about subjectivity, Dudzikowa (2007) emphasizes that the direction given to self-creative activity is the result of an individual's pursuit of self-knowledge in the area of who they are in reality and who they would like to be. This self-knowledge is related to "the general conception of the world and one's own place in it, and the realization of one's self-concept" (Dudzikowa 2007: 288), and depends on the stage of life at which the individuals find themselves and their aspirations.

According to Dudzikowa, the realization of self-creative potential includes striving for self-change by determining the direction of action, dealing with the action itself, whose subject and object is both the individual, and evaluating its effects. What distinguishes Dudzikowa's approach from Korzeniowski's is the author's emphasis on the phenomenon of change. In their view, self-creation always aims at changing the personality structure and thus at reducing the discrepancy between the current state and the desired state (Dudzikowa 2007).

Korzeniowski (1983), on the other hand, wrote that subjectivity in the sphere of an individual's actions can be aimed at maintaining the current state of internal and external reality. In the context of considering the self-creative activities of older people, it seems that in scientific discourse the authors are closer to the understanding of subjectivity and self-creation proposed by Dudzikowa, placing

the emphasis on the older person's willingness to change themselves and adapt to changes in the surrounding reality. At the same time, some authors point out that a consciously chosen aging strategy can be based on an attitude of withdrawal and passivity (Bugajska 2015).

A phenomenon that is directly related to subjectivity, and thus also to self-creation, is a sense of agency. Individuals who have a belief that their actions have an impact on the reality around them, at the same time show a greater sense of subjectivity (Zieliński 1983); they are therefore more likely to engage in self-creative activities. A sense of agency and the resulting sense of self-worth increases an individual's ability to adapt to changing life conditions (Olszewski 2019). At the same time, it has been proven that the sense of agency decreases with age, which can be an obstacle to self-creation (Moore 2016). The reason for the proven decline in the sense of selfhood and agency is, among other things, the lack of a sense of belonging, acceptance or understanding on the part of younger generations, who hold different values and function in a completely different way from the older person. A person in late adulthood may feel that their voice is no longer important, and important decisions are made without considering their needs. The institutions of the health and social welfare sector, where older people are often treated without the respect they deserve, also have their role in objectifying seniors (Błachnio 2015).

Achieving wisdom as the essence and goal of self-creative work on oneself

Despite the many regressive changes in cognitive functioning that can occur with age, old age provides special conditions for achieving wisdom and spiritual development (Straś-Romanowska 2020). Developing wisdom, leading to a better understanding and acceptance of the course of one's life, thus becomes a particularly important developmental task in late adulthood (Pietrasiński 1996). Wisdom means extensive knowledge that fosters the ability to understand and solve potential problems, based on insightful thinking, and also indicates openness to new knowledge and freedom from self-centeredness and self-deception (Erikson 2004). The pursuit of wisdom in a self-creative perspective is described by Pietrasiński (2009) as developing a deep mind. An individual with a deep mind strives to better understand reality by updating their knowledge and distancing themselves from their own beliefs, as well as developing existential competence, that is, the ability to use knowledge responsibly and engage in everyday life situations. Developing the deep mind is enabled by self-reflection. This is because self-creation is linked to the lifelong process of forming an individual's biography, learning from it and giving it meaning. As Aleksandra Chmielińska and Monika Modrzejewska-Świgulska (2021) note, reaching into autobiographical memory and self-reflective recall of one's life story allows for flexible and creative description of reality, which is the background of self-creative, subjectivity-building-oriented processes.

Wisdom can be divided into practical and spiritual wisdom (Straś-Romanowska 2020). While the former is focused on the temporal world and includes an individual's knowledge focused on the material world and the pragmatics of life, spiritual wisdom focuses on the extra-material, transcendent reality and the search for meaning. Due to the dynamics of changes taking place both in the world around the older person and within himself, the stock of practical wisdom may decline over time, while spiritual wisdom has a chance to develop and maintain into late adulthood (Straś-Romanowska 2020). The self-creative work on developing wisdom thus not only becomes an important developmental task, but also enables a more flexible understanding of changing reality, which is the first important step in developing the ability to creatively engage with it in order to adapt (Krasoń 2011; Szmidt 2018).

Late adulthood promotes the development of transcendent wisdom, which is the goal of the individual's targeted self-improvement (Zawadzka, Stalmach 2015). The phenomenon of gerotranscendence involves the development of wisdom that leads to a growing sense of transcendence, that is, oneness with the universe (Tornstam 1994). Gerotranscendence makes it possible to see meanings from the perspective of the totality of life experiences. It allows the development of altruism at the expense of reduced egocentrism and concern for one's own well-being (Halicki 2006). On the level of social relations, gerotranscendence helps to reduce involvement in unnecessary interactions and get rid of limitations blocking self-expression until now. The redefinition of the present and the past associated with gerotranscendence, and finding hitherto unknown meanings in them, makes for a growing sense of unity with past and future generations. Gerotranscendence enables a love of life while accepting death as the natural order of things (Tornstam 2011; Brudek 2016). It also fosters acceptance of ambiguity (Brudek 2016), which means it can have a neutralizing effect on cognitive rigidity that increases with age (Hill 2009). Thus, achieving gerotranscendence involves a special kind of self-creation, directed at the search for new meanings. At the same time, due to the role of transcendent wisdom in the process of adaptation to old age, Tornstam's theory can be included in the group of theories of successful aging (Brudek 2016).

Positive aging strategies as an opportunity for self-creation

An older person's willingness to engage in self-creative activity promotes the adoption of specific aging strategies (Muszynski, Wąsinski, Fabiś 2020). I will refer to these strategies as successful aging strategies for the purposes of this text, although they are sometimes described in the literature as positive or prospective strategies. They denote various manifestations of creative adaptation to the changes in reality identified with the experience of aging. In this context, symptomatic manifestations of self-creation become the strategies described by Robert Hill (2009) that enable an increase in quality of life despite age-related deficits. The focus of positive aging

strategies is acceptance of one's own age and the associated functional changes. This enables the search for new ways of coping, learning, and development.

It seems relevant in the context of positive aging strategies to invoke the theory of *selective optimization with compensation* (Baltes, Baltes 1990). Also in this theory can be found the special importance of the self-creative nature of a satisfying old age. According to the aforementioned concept, well-being is achieved in old age through flexible adaptation to changing access to one's resources with age. This strategy involves selecting and optimizing activities in those areas of life that are particularly important to the individual, while compensating for losses associated with the aging process (Cimochowska, Zagrodzka 2018)

An important role in preparing for successful aging is played by the positive management of developmental crises, as described by Erik Erikson (2004), which represent a special kind of challenge and turning point in a person's life. Going through developmental crises, also in connection with old age, becomes a unique opportunity for self-development (Wąsiński 2015). Positive coping with developmental crises in late adulthood leads to integrity, understood as acceptance of oneself and one's own life story and the assumption of responsibility for it. It also allows for the integration of past, future, and present, and demonstrates the value of intergenerational bonds (Erikson 2012). Beata Bugajska (2015) proposes to consider human aging from the perspective of another developmental crisis, preceding the last of the crises mentioned by Erikson. This crisis is intended to enable the development of commitment, that is, to choose a way of life that allows further personal development while accepting the changes that arise from the aging process. Understood in this way, the subject's engagement means their willingness to actualize themselves and set new goals for personal development. Understanding the difference between engagement and activity is crucial here. This is because engagement can involve withdrawal from certain activities and an attitude of passivity in some areas. In contrast to commitment, resignation consists of the conviction of the pointlessness of further development while simultaneously giving up previous activities. By developing commitment, one can be satisfied with one's existence. It has been proven that those seniors who are simultaneously engaged both in the present and in setting goals and making plans to achieve them in the future have greater satisfaction with their lives (Timoszyk-Tomczak, Bugajska 2013). Commitment also fosters the courage necessary to confront death and build transcendent wisdom.

Old age as a moment of role change in family and society

The most important psychosocial developmental task associated with entering late adulthood, according to Maria Straś-Romanowska (2020), is the adaptation to a completely new phase of life in which changes of a regressive nature take precedence over progressive ones. Adaptation to old age in all its manifestations requires the individual to engage in a certain type of activity. Henryk Olszewski (2019: 243) wrote

that "adaptation to old age is related to the type and intensity of voluntary and spontaneous self-activity." This voluntariness and intentionality testify to the self-creative nature of the adaptation process.

Old age is about coping with changes that occur in the area of social conditions, demands and expectations for the person who is coming into life (Boyd, Bee 2007). The nature and extent of the social roles that an older person takes on are changing, and the ability to adapt to these is particularly important in this context. Some roles become less important or disappear completely and entirely new ones appear instead. Late adulthood is associated with withdrawal from professional activity and thus the emergence of the new role of a retiree. Retirement itself can be viewed both as an opportunity to relax and develop one's own interests (Fabiś, Gomolla, 2023) and as an expression of a lack of social usefulness and a sign of the approaching end of life (Zalewska 2009). Attitudes towards retirement can depend on, among other things, professional status, financial situation, family relationships, health status or gender (Susułowska 1989, according to Straś-Romanowska 2020). There is an increased mortality rate for men in the period after retirement (Matlakiewicz, Solarczyk-Szwec 2009). One factor that could contribute to this situation is the loss of the most important roles previously performed – that of worker and breadwinner. The culture of glorifying social utility and the high level of activity in which we currently live (Granosik 2019) mean that retirement is sometimes associated with a particularly strong fear of loss of social status and the need to maintain the previous position (Szarota 2004), which is quite possible to hinder a successful entry into old age. Assuming the role of a retiree turns out to be easier for those people who also maintain activity in other areas or have the ability to take optimizing and compensating measures (Baltes, Baltes 1990). An elderly person, for whom it is important to feel needed, can replace professional activity with involvement in local community activities, just as a person for whom physical activity is important can replace cycling with Nordic walking. Educational activities (Białożyt 2017) aimed at the specific, individual needs of the elderly person can also be a factor facilitating adaptation to retirement. The older person's own attitude to the end of working life and having plans for life in retirement are also very important (Kowalska 2015). People who have plans that are feasible after the end of working life have more positive attitudes toward retirement. This fact is in line with the conclusion, cited earlier, about the adaptive nature of older people's demonstrated orientation toward the future and related goals (Timoszyk-Tomczak, Bugajska 2013). The nature of leaving work itself is also not insignificant. It is better handled by those who have had the opportunity to prepare for it and say goodbye to the people with whom they have worked so far (Kowalska 2015). It is noteworthy that in Poland there is still no culture of soft retirement, gradual downsizing or volunteering of older people in the workplace, which would significantly facilitate the transition of people for whom work is an important value.

Adjustment in late adulthood is crucial in the context of adapting to the changing roles a person plays in the family. With the death of the last parent, the role of the child ends (Straś-Romanowska 2020), just as the role of the wife or husband can end

with the death of the spouse and thus the role of the widower or, more commonly, the widow. The roles of grandmother and grandfather also emerge. Adapting to changing roles in the family allows an older person to maintain a sense of the value and importance of their own activities as well as satisfaction, and provides a sense of intergenerational bonds, allowing both giving and receiving support (Steuden 2014). The integration of older people into family life, combined, among other things, with the opportunity for self-creative development in the role of grandmother or grandfather, has a positive effect on their life satisfaction (Kucharewicz 2016).

Modernity and the socio-cultural changes taking place in it make adaptation to changing roles in the family a particularly demanding challenge today. This is due, among other things, to the fact that we now largely live in a prefigurative culture (Mead 2000). This means that due to the unprecedented scope and pace of change in the modern world, the life experiences of older people may no longer be sufficient to understand younger generations. Increasingly, young people, who represent change and readiness to adapt to the modern world, are being held up as role models. The model of family functioning has also changed. Multigenerational families living together have become rare, and meetings with representatives of the oldest generation have become sporadic and occasional (Wnuk 2013). An additional barrier to building intergenerational integration is the stereotypes persisting in the consciousness of both older and younger generations about representatives of other generations (Klimczuk 2010). All of this means that older people may feel that the roles of grandparent, grandmother, or family senior have lost their importance over the past decades, and believe that their current roles are less valuable than those they held previously. This can make it difficult for them to successfully enter old age and take on the roles that come with it.

The life roles assumed by an individual also have an axiological dimension. Each role is assigned a value that arises from the narratives that persist in the collective consciousness and individual value system. This system is based on the meanings that a person attributes to the reality surrounding him and his own existence. Conformity to this system can therefore define a person's attitude to the changing reality and his or her own role in it. The system of values and meanings is also largely related to the sense of identity (Kozielecki 1986) and thus to the self-creative activity of the individual, which aims to help shape it (Pietrasiński 2009).

Barriers to self-creative old age

For years, the discourse has been dominated by the paradigm of productive aging, which equates a successful old age with maintaining the same level of activity that accompanied a person in earlier phases of life. Echoes of this way of thinking about aging can even be found in some of the concepts I have cited about successful aging. At the same time, there may be a doomed attempt to transfer developmental tasks that are characteristic of earlier periods of life to late adulthood or even old age

(Muszyński 2016). While virtually every conception of successful aging emphasizes the importance of activity in late adulthood, it is important to consider qualitative differences in the importance of activity. Studies conducted in the spirit of Western culture tend to focus on observable, external manifestations of activity, and their absence is sometimes equated with inactivity and a move away from successful aging. This deprives older people of the opportunity to personally define the concept of activity and determine what type of activity is of value to them (Muszyński 2016). In this area, Tornstam's (1994) theory of gerotranscendence stands out, which emphasizes the importance of self-creative activity expressed in the subject's self-reflection. It therefore seems sensible to resort to the previously described distinction between activity and engagement (Bugajska 2015), which does not presuppose any externally observable manifestations in older people. The persistent image in the collective consciousness of a successful old age, identified with activities in areas imposed from above, makes it particularly difficult for an older person to follow the path of transcendence, to concentrate on one's own life.

Experiencing crises, also in connection with development in old age, is accompanied by feelings of helplessness, identity disruption, and fears. This fear primarily affects existential content (Olszewski 2019). Irvin Yalom (2007), in his description of existential psychodynamics, reminds us of the existence of contradictory motives and aspirations in the individual that arise from man's confrontation with life's ultimate concerns. This confrontation awakens existential fears and forces people to redefine the meaning of their lives and face their own mortality. These concerns are: awareness of the inevitability of death, freedom and responsibility for one's own decisions, isolation combined with a feeling of loneliness and meaninglessness in life. In the context of existential concerns, Yalom writes: "Responsibility means authorship; to be aware of one's own authorship means to give up the belief that there is someone else who creates and protects man. A deep loneliness is immanent in the act of self-creation" (Yalom 2007: 368).

Despite the natural existential fear of taking responsibility for our own creation, human development can only progress as we become increasingly individualized and take responsibility for our destiny. Therefore, it is possible that the fear of taking responsibility and the resulting sense of existential isolation in the experience of older people becomes a barrier to the sense of agency and associated self-creation. It is worth noting at this point that those who are least likely to cope with fear are those who are not involved in personal development, who are less psychologically mature, and who are deprived of a sense of agency through uprooting from their environment in favor of placement in a care facility before death (Swenson 1961; after Yalom 2007). Better off, on the other hand, are those who have taken the path of transcendent wisdom in search of symbolic immortality.

The existential, and one might also say self-creative, task of an elderly person thus becomes a balancing act between the desire to remain dependent and avoid anxiety and the need to complete the cycle of development associated with confronting existential fears and the responsibility of seeking meaning in one's life.

Conclusion

Adapting to change and building wisdom are two specific developmental tasks in late adulthood (Straś-Romanowska 2020). The unifying element is the intentionality of the associated activities, which indicates their self-creative dimension (Pietrasiński 2009). The essence of this text is to determine how these two processes interact in a kind of feedback loop. Transcendental wisdom allows one to understand and make sense of one's age, mortality, and life course, thereby increasing the acceptance of reality so important to the adaptation process. Adaptation to age and the abandonment of the doomed struggle against its manifestations, in turn, enables the turn to self-reflection, which is necessary to tread the path of gerotranscendence.

Self-creative measures aimed at adapting to age and the roles associated with are linked to the commitment described by Bugajskaya (2015), i.e. the conscious choice of a way of life that enables development and at the same time accepts the inevitable changes that come with old age. The diversity of these ways of being means that an individual's self-creative actions may not be obvious to an outside observer.

However, the above considerations lead us to the question of whether an older person's self-creative activities always increase their ability to adapt to age and whether they must lead to greater openness to change. This brings us back to the sense of subjectivity described by Korzeniowski (1983), the manifestation of which may be the desire to maintain the status quo. Finally, resistance to change, manifested in fidelity to one's beliefs and in actions resisting changes that threaten those beliefs, may represent value in the eyes of some older people. These actions are intentional and lead to the creation and maintenance of identity, so it is natural to consider them as manifestations of self-creation (Pietrasiński 2009; Wąsiński 2018). Expecting older people who have chosen this mindset to be active and adapt to change is not only pointless, but can also deepen the generational gap.

Even if one assumes that adapting to changing reality consistently leads to better well-being for older people, the question remains: Does self-creation always lead to the same thing? Can one also speak of self-creation if a person's identity is shaped by them in a way that ultimately leads to a worsening of their well-being or their isolation? To obtain an answer, it seems necessary to give voice to older people themselves and to understand the meaning they give to change both in existential terms and in the practice of daily life, by continuing research in this area.

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