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## **“Greying population”: Economic, social, and ethical appreciation of old age\***

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### **Abstract**

As the population is growing older, sociologists and economists are becoming more interested in analyzing this phenomenon. There are two paradigms for interpreting old age. The first one points to excluding old people from social and economic life. It is argued that there should be a balance between activities and possibilities of old people. The other paradigm points to the social, political and economic activities of old people until the end of their lives. It emphasizes their life experience and competencies.

The article presents new processes and socio-cultural phenomena that refer to seniors. Some of them are negative like ageism, social isolation, deprivation, the uncertainty of fate and existence. Others are positive and described as “the cult of age” like the dynamic expansion of the grey people industry, development of health care and consumer projects for the elderly. The article argues that the sense and dignity of life of the elderly should be defended, as it is the main motivation and reason for living.

**Keywords:** the elderly, gerontology, ageism, population greying

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## 1. Introduction

Due to the ongoing process of society ageing, also called population greying, there is a growing interest in old age as a social and economic phenomenon. Gerontology as a branch of science dealing with the processes of ageing and old age ailments is joined by new subdisciplines analysing old age in a wider context of demographic, cultural, social and economic processes (e.g. geragogy, social gerontology, gerontopolitics). In research and social policy, we come across two paradigms of interpreting old age (Adamczyk, 2000). The first one points to the exclusion of the elderly from social and economic life, their withdrawal from and ending professional activity. It is believed here that potential activities should be tailored to one's capabilities in old age and to give them a chance for peaceful senescence. The second paradigm emphasises the social, political and economic activity of individuals in old age. It is highlighted here that the elderly can further participate in their professional life or replace it with new social roles, emphasising their competences and life experience. These two attitudes to old age ask different existential questions and differently approach defending the sense of meaning in the life of an elderly individual.

The goal of the article is to present new socio-cultural processes and phenomena affecting the elderly. Among them there are negative ones, resulting from ageism, such as social isolation, deprivation processes, loss of sense of meaning in life, uncertainty regarding the future and suffering. We also present positive processes and phenomena, described as the "cult of the old", i.e.: dynamic development of the *grey people industry*, developments in healthcare, consumer projects targeted at the elderly. The author of this work hypothesises that we should defend the sense of meaning and the dignity of elderly individuals. The need for the sense of meaning in life is a fundamental motivation and reason to live. "Greying population" creates new challenges for the economy, politicians, social care, and medicine.

The titular appreciation should be understood as restoring value to the grey population, which it was systematically losing in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That time saw many negative processes which lowered the quality of life and social status of the elderly. In the 1990s in Poland, retiring was connected with marginalisation and worsening of the already difficult life circumstances of the elderly, sense of loneliness and the loss of the sense of meaning. In mass culture and the ideology of consumptionism we saw the rise of the cult of youth, which consequently depreciated the social status of the elderly. A basic goal of social policy, the mass media and many other subjects, is to appreciate the reality of the life of the elderly and to change the way old age is perceived. The elderly are an important part of the society and they can contribute many practical and symbolic values, which are useful in fostering younger generations and maintain and create new social bonds. They play a very important role in the economy, political decisions and choices.

## 2. Demographic data and the economy

All demographic data suggest that the population in the civilisation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is ageing, which confirms all earlier tendencies. Let us consider the current state of affairs and demographic forecast. In 2001 the number of people of more than 60 years of age amounted to 600 million. A simulation predicts that in 2020 it will rise to a billion and in 2050—2 billion. The distribution of the elderly in different populations around the world is and will be varied. Rich societies, with a high standard of living, will be predominantly old; in many countries, the elderly will constitute at least a one-third of the whole population. These tendencies can be seen most clearly in Japan and the countries of the EU. Let us consider the population distribution in terms of age in a few European Union countries.

According to the UN criteria, a given society crosses the threshold of demographic old age when the percentage of people aged 65 and more reaches 7% of the entire structure of the population. International organisations use different indicators showing the tendency for the global population to age. The relationship between the population of people over 65 and those in productive age is measured by the *elderly dependency ratio*. It shows a clear tendency for the societies to age. It is interesting to analyse the data showing the ratio of people over 65 years of age to 100 people aged 15–64. For example: in Japan, in 2000 this ratio was 25, and in 2050 it will be 72; similarly, in Greece it is 26 and will rise to 62, in Germany 24 now to 49 in the 2050. The general tendency is that the better developed a country is, the greater the ratio of people aged over 65 to those in the productive age (United Nations Population Division, 2003).

Poland is not a demographically old society in Europe. However, all the data suggest that we are quickly becoming one. We reached the 7% threshold in 1967. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the average life expectancy of women rose by 14 years and 11 years for men. It is predicted that in 2020 there will be 9.5 million people aged 60 or more (24% of the whole population). The number of the oldest group, aged 80 and more, will also go up from 740 thousand in 2002 to 1.4 million in 2020. When it comes to the elderly dependency ratio, it was 18 in 2000 and it is predicted to rise to 50 elderly people per 100 people in their productive age.

The demographic tendencies of the Polish society to age bring about specific economic issues. Among the factors limiting professional activity among the elderly we can name: (1) unemployment and the processes of replacing older workers with younger ones; (2) relatively high cost of employing older workers; (3) the structure of pension systems, encouraging employees to retire early; (4) changes in the character and organisation of work; (5) introduction of modern technologies, requiring older workers to gain new skills; (6) unprofitability of training older workers; (7) psychological traits of the elderly, old age processes (health condition, cognitive abilities, the sense of meaning, motivation for work, exhaustion from work); (8) characteristics and social interactions (relatively lower level of education, problems with adapting to new conditions, aversion towards older workers) (Halicka & Halicki, 2002).

Tendencies on the job market caused new socio-economic divisions, due to which the elderly were eliminated from the job market, increasing the number of the so-called early pensioners. The professional marginalisation of the elderly and compulsory retirements increased social poverty and lowered general life quality. Recent events made political and economic decision-makers anxious because they were interpreted according to the following pattern: the higher the percentage of the elderly, the greater the burden associated with the functioning of the pension system, health and social care, and fulfilling other various social benefits that the elderly were legally entitled to. In some European countries, the pension system is based on the redistribution of the funds generated by the young workers. A reform of the pension system in Poland introduces the principle of capital accumulation, however, its first beneficiaries will be the thirty-year-olds on the present time. Because many ageing societies are in a similar position, globally various initiatives are undertaken to protect and defend the well-being of elderly workers in the job market. Within this international debate on employment of the elderly, we should mention the Second World Assembly on Ageing organised by the United Nations in Madrid in 2002. During the summit, a new strategy regarding the elderly on the job market was proposed. Key elements of the project can be summarised as follows:

- (1) a gradual and gentle transition from professional activity to inactivity and providing the elderly with opportunities for keeping their jobs for as long as they need;
- (2) preventing discrimination against the elderly in the job market;
- (3) facilitating the participation of the elderly in life-long learning, providing them with wider job opportunities;
- (4) including the elderly in the job market based on new information technologies;
- (5) equal treatment of women and men within pension systems by, e.g. evening their retirement age.

The European Union promotes active social policy towards the elderly on the job market (European Commission, 2003). Instead of early retirement, the elderly will be encouraged to remain professionally active. It is planned to raise the employment factor of people aged 55–64 to 50% by 2010. In 2002, this ratio in EU countries was 38.7%. It is also suggested to rise the effective retirement age by 5 years to 65.4 years. For the EU in 2002 it was 60.5 years. Poland is in a very difficult situation if it wants to fulfil EU recommendations any time soon. In our country, the employment factor of people aged 55–64 was 30% in 2002, 22% of which were women and 40% men (Szatur-Jaworska, n.d.). So, we have a long way to go, even more so because in Poland there is no comprehensive social policy program that would meet the criteria set by the EU and the expectations of the elderly. According to many scholars investigating the issues of ageing societies, social policy actors do not play an important role in shaping and organising the world of the elderly. Instead, they focus on immediate solutions, rationing social and medical services, and allocating resources, which are always insufficient (cf. Błędowski, 2002; Szatur-Jaworska, 2000).

These steps to extend the time of professional activity of the elderly may not be effective due to a stable decrease in demand for jobs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A popular futurist formula “20:80” suggests that the needs of an economy can be satisfied by effective employment of just 20% of the professionally active population. If these forecasts come true, the most injured will be the elderly. However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as there is a demand for work, many countries have raised the retirement age. There is also a demand for “everyday life jobs” (e.g. small repairs, pet care, official and legal matters), which are done free of charge within self-help groups and a popular principle of mutual service exchange.

Positive changes are taking place in the global economy that are raising the purchasing power of the elderly and a whole *grey people industry* is being created. The most rapidly developing area is the job market providing for the elderly: medicine, pharmacy, plastic surgery, rehabilitation, cosmetology, tourism. Pharmaceuticals skilfully cater for the older population by developing and marketing drugs are designed for this group. Also apparent is the cooperation between the grey people industry and the mass media to promote a healthy lifestyle, a mindset of vitality, and consumption for pleasure. The fact that business has noticed the consumption potential of the elderly results in new economic projects such as, e.g. creation of sun cities, chain stores adapted to the needs of older customers, entertainment centres. The economic potential of the elderly is estimated to amount to 20 trillion dollars. In the USA, the elderly spend \$525 billion a year on healthcare. According to Thurow (1995), research, pensions systems in Western Europe will cost 50% GDP. All these economic phenomena must be met with a favourable social atmosphere towards the elderly and elimination of their discrimination. There remains much to be done in this field.

### 3. Ageism

Ageism encompasses biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices towards the people over a certain age (Nelson, 2002; Szukalski, 2004). In scientific literature, we also find the term gerontophobia to describe a fear of old age and ailments and social reactions that accompany it. The term *ageism* was introduced in 1969 by Robert Butler at the opening of the National Institute on Aging, dealing with issues of unequal and harmful treatment of the elderly (APA, 2002). The issue is highly relevant in Poland, where symptoms of age discrimination are widespread. On the website of Stowarzyszenie Akademii Rozwoju Filantropii w Polsce we can find a questionnaire with a template for sending information about age discrimination. Among the areas of discrimination there included we find: the job market and employment, education, healthcare and social services, media and advertising, transportation, an active participation in the social life and decision making. According to this organisation, discrimination is when someone is treated unfairly due to their age. However, we do not know when we become “too old”. The

threshold has shifted depending on the needs of other people and institutions. For some, it can be 60 or 70 years of age, for others there can be discrimination in their 50s, e.g. in the job market.

Unfortunately, even the Internet can be used to sow hatred and escalate the negative attitude of the young towards the elderly, disabled, or homeless. The media described a case of harassment of an elderly homeless by the students of a secondary school in Opole. According to a commentary by a psychologist, it was a symptom of extreme prejudice, lack of empathy, and poor education as these youths ignored all moral norms (Wodecka-Lasota, 2006, p. 2). In that case, we saw the negative stereotyping of an older person in action: indolent, sickly, jobless and penniless. Moreover, he was viewed as a socially isolated individual who could be mocked and ridiculed. The event became more dramatic because the youths perceived the social helplessness of an old person as “good fun”.

Social psychologists assume that an older individual is a carrier and co-creator of stereotypes and will confront the simplistic, negative, and reluctant attitudes. In cultural orientation, the stereotype of an old individual is treated as a cultural model, transmitted within the process of socialisation, and an individual reproduces it in various social interactions (Boksański, 1997; Macrae, Stangor & Hewstone, 1999). These can pertain to an individual as well as a social group. A traditional interpretation assumes that negative affect towards an elderly person is a result of the generalisation of the entire group of the elderly. The attitude towards the elderly consists of beliefs, affect, and behaviour. It can be seen on many levels of social relations, and it can also be experienced differently by individual participants in such interactions. Prejudice can take various forms of aggression or frustration (Nelson, 2003). Aversion stems from the necessity to spend time with or take care of the elderly, e.g. sharing a flat with them, working in social care institutions, sharing means of public transportation. Thus understood, an elderly individual is an obstacle, a source of disturbance in realising and achieving one's life goals, taking actions, or experiencing pleasure. Negative emotions come into play, such as: anger, fear, anxiety, impatience, which can lead to aggression towards the elderly. Aggression means acts of hostility, dealing harm, violence or extremely vehement behaviour. It can take the form of verbal aggression when one's words are used to deprecate and humiliate the elderly and label them negatively. Physical aggression leads not only to emotional damage but also battery and bodily harm. Both types of aggression occur in families, public institutions, social and healthcare facilities, and nursing homes—institutions created to cater to the needs of the older people and safeguard their well-being. The elderly face oppression only because they are old, infirm and in need of help.

#### **4. The need for social appreciation of old age**

The above information about the discrimination towards the elderly suggests that there is a need for a radical change in social thinking and the attitudes about the old age. It is necessary to ennoble old age in the system of youth education, cul-

ture, and the mass media. Undoubtedly, a crucial issue regarding social appreciation of the elderly in Poland requires creating an active social policy to meet the expectations of Poles and international standards, especially those of the EU. The policy of the state assumes combating the rising level of poverty and the decrease in life quality resulting from withdrawal from professional activity. On the job market, with high unemployment, amounting to 18% in 2006, most affected are the elderly, whom nobody wants to employ and nobody wants to support in staying in work. They become the so-called early pensioners, redundant individuals, left on their own, whose quality of life significantly deteriorates. Along with their passing onto another stage of old age, they become clients of social and health services. When evaluating the quality of life of the elderly, we should take into consideration many factors of health-related, economic, social, psychological and cultural nature. Different measures of their quality of life are used with regard to its four fundamental dimensions: physical, psychological, social, and environmental. The European Council launches a number of initiatives for more equality and the betterment of lives of the old and the disabled.

Most programmes are directed to ameliorate health-related issues experienced by the elderly, which is treated as a necessary condition for achieving satisfaction in other areas of life. The WHO project *Health for All in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* presents very optimistic ideas about the health of the elderly. Target 5 of the declaration reads (“Zdrowie 21,” 2001, p. 75):

- (1) people over 65 should have the opportunity of enjoying their full health potential and playing an active social role;
- (2) there should be an increase of at least 20% in life expectancy and in disability-free life expectancy at age 65 years;
- (3) there should be an increase of at least 50% in the proportion of people at age 80 years enjoying a level of health in a home environment that permits them to maintain autonomy, self-esteem and their place in society.

To realise these goals, various individuals and institutions need to cooperate to create a system of facilitating autonomous life for the elderly. A key thing here is to integrate these programs. One example is the American Program of All-inclusive Care for the *Elderly (PACE) That Enables High Quality Services At A Low Cost* (Szczerbińska, 2004, pp. 20–28). It is based on integrated action of various forms of medical care and socialisation activities to decrease a sense of isolation and marginalisation of the elderly.

In 2003, the Second European Conference of Ministers responsible for Integration Policies for People with Disabilities, held in Spain, dealt with the issue of disability. Its participants formulated directives for social policy towards the disabled. Special attention was devoted to: the necessity to improve the quality of life of the disabled and their families, protection and popularisation of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the dignity of life. Because in Europe the number of the elderly is growing, each created strategy should include institutional and practical solutions for improving the quality of life of the elderly and the disabled. The

emphasis was put on preserving a good quality of life in old age and lessor dependence on support services. The key to achieving this goal was in improving the health of the disabled and their participation and integration in the job market.

Another important element of social policy towards the elderly is the issue of gender equality and the status of elderly women. Because women live on average 10 years longer than men, they are more affected by adverse old age circumstances and social reactions to their fate. European institutions shape an active policy of supporting women in terms of their health and create programs to counteract discrimination and social exclusion. Despite the fact that Poland has an extensive system of social support, women are more affected by poverty than men. The problem of poverty among elderly women is especially dangerous because they often live in solitude, without any means for their basic needs or medicines. In the past, early retirement opportunities for women were seen as a privilege, nowadays it turns out that early retirement has negative financial consequences, aggravating their poverty and misery (Puzewicz-Barska & Tarasiewicz, 2004). Especially difficult is the time of advanced old age or serious illness. Patients are then in need of 24-hour medical care in stationary and at-home palliative and hospice care units. Because the contracts signed by the National Health Fund are small, the operation of these units is based to a large extent on the work of volunteers, who go to great lengths to selflessly support those in need. However, these institutions lack professionally trained staff to provide long-term care. State care institutions cannot cope with the demand for integrated care for the elderly. Many commercial institutions and healthcare centres have emerged. However, the cost of care at the private institutions is beyond the means of most that need such care (cf. Agencja Promocji Inicjatyw Społecznych, 2003). Concerns were also raised regarding the quality of service in nursing homes. Legal and administrative standards were not observed in terms of the conditions these institutions should provide and the professional competence of their owners was questioned. The media reported cases of harassment and humiliation of patients in private care institutions, which were generally outside administrative control. There is a need for creating mechanisms of control of institutions operating in this field. Most importantly, commercial activity providing services for the infirm, in need of care and support should be run according to the principles of business and social ethics. A good solution for maintaining a decent quality of service are the certifications awarded by Stowarzyszenie Domów Opieki i Pensjonatów dla Seniorów (Nursing Home Association). Information about the Association recommendation can help rationally choose the institutions that will meet the expectations of their clients and their families.

An important element of social appreciation of old age should be the quality of interpersonal relations and intergenerational communication. A consequence of social alienation in global civilisation is the separation of its participants, the breaking of bonds based on face to face contacts, replaced with anonymous media communication. Young people have better skills in using modern means of communication, therefore the elderly lose their authority, the role of a sage and counsellor. The young address their questions elsewhere. Contrary to these tendencies,



it is worth applying the concept of gift to explain these relations. The elderly must not be treated as a problem by younger generations, they should be included into the system of intergenerational bonds. An elderly individual has vast experience, interesting observations and biography, which can be of use to other members of their family. It is here, in the intergenerational discourse, that worthwhile values are created. In Tischner's philosophical anthropology we can find a justification for why meeting another man is one of the most important human experiences. To understand another person, it is necessary to talk to them, become interested in their personality, stay open to their problems. Such a meeting also means giving them a hand and achieving immediate clarity of the drama participants. Many philosophers emphasise that man is a being who, in order to live, needs hope and meeting the Other. Elderly individuals especially need love, care and truth. At the last stage of life, this dialogue is needed by both sides of the relation: the elderly and dying, and those who remain with the sense of losing their loved ones. Therefore, engaging in a dialogue with the old, suffering, and dying is our moral obligation.

## **5. Theological and ethical appreciation of old age**

Undoubtedly, the best intellectual basis for the appreciation of old age in the contemporary world are the words and the last stage of life of John Paul II. The meaning of existence, from its beginning to the end of its biological duration, always was the central point of interest of Pope's moral theology. Metaphysical and personal dimension of existence are emphasised in several Vatican documents: "life comes from God; it is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in his breath of life" (John Paul II, 1998a, Chapter II, 39, p. 73, 1988b). The beginning of life, its development and dawn lead to the old age—the third and the final stage of the mystery of human existence. According to Christian theology, each individual is special and unique, has the dignity of a conscious, free, and a creative subject. Life encompasses both our divine, in a way transcendental origin, and a specifically understood social relation with others. Man is created in God's image and after His likeness and achieves the fullness of their personal existence through authentic communion with others. It has consequences for old age. Man, in this life should come to terms with the natural process of ageing and dying. The culmination of earthly existence is the promise of an eschatological way of joining God. The Holy Father, through his attitude in the last years of his life, expressed his solidarity with all the suffering and taught us that despite our biological imperfection we can affirm life with every action we take. Old age and dying are inherent elements of human existence, therefore, these deserve special care and consideration. The Pope emphasised the primacy of a dying individual and their right to death with dignity. He opposed all attempts to instrumentalise human death. Healthcare workers are supposed to serve life in all its stages, "especially at the time of weakness and illness". In its most recent interpretations, the principle of the sanctity of

human life, its protection and promotion does not exclude the right to dignity in death and to discontinuation of extraordinary treatment, if such is the will of the suffering and dying individual. If they cannot be helped in any way, we should accept their imminent passing (Bołoz, 2002).

Ethical appreciation of old age should include the element of axiological affirmation of the person and their moral responsibility for themselves and others. A chance for all people is to live in a community where an elderly individual is treated in a positive way as a rule, causes propulsive reactions, and where all its members act *pro publico bono*. People, regardless of their age, make various decisions, for which they should be held accountable. It can be said that the sense of responsibility increases with age until its decline in senescence. Responsibility is usually understood as readiness to be held accountable for one's choices and actions. The elderly are free from responsibility for themselves as long as they are intellectually and physically fit. It gets worse when the physical quality of their life is low and they have to be supported by others to organise their daily lives and realise their basic needs. A society which is well organised and performs its duties towards the elderly should be valued higher in terms of its organisational and moral development. The sense of responsibility for the elderly should be both of legal and moral nature. An elderly person seeks support from others. The support can be material, informational, psychological, and can be expected from individuals as well as the state. Being morally responsible for our own existence, we also serve other people better. The concept of *humanitas* is the foundation of solidarity with the elderly, the weak, and the suffering. Peaceful cooperation and coexistence of people of different ages are possible and necessary for the sake of all the participants of social interactions that respect the dignity of human beings.

## 6. Conclusions

The need for creating a new axiology of old age, based on the idea of “adding years to life,” was suggested in international agreements. The appreciation of old age can be successful if it becomes a joint effort of various institutions and actors. Most of the EU health programs are based on the need to coordinate health and social services in local communities, which can best assess the needs and abilities of the elderly.

There are several important stages in appreciating old age. The first stage pertains to raising awareness about the value of old age and the role of the elderly in public life. It is about making all people realise the economic, political, and social importance of people in old age. The second stage involves healthy ageing, including especially prevention and holistic treatment of health as physical, psychological, and social well-being. The third stage involves engaging local communities in creating an infrastructure that would be friendly for the elderly and their caretakers. Local authorities and administration should make decisions facilitating the improvement of their quality of life and ensure their implementation. The fourth

stage means helping all members of the community realise that the elderly have a potential that requires special care—they contribute their experience and wisdom, take care of their grandchildren, often financially support the young. Successful socialisation for old age should pertain to both the elderly and the young. The young should learn proper behaviour towards the elderly and how to support them in various ways, they ought to voluntarily help those in need, the suffering, and the elderly. A mature individual should be ready to enter old age, so their socialisation should involve learning how to be old, how to deal with advanced old age and, eventually, death. Because socialisation alone is not enough, to combat negative stereotypes and the symptoms of ageism, especially among the young, we should develop a system of gerontological education, teaching respect for old age. The demographic changes of the modern world confirm the important role of elderly individuals as consumers of goods and services, loyal political supporters, participants of Universities of the Third Age, and loving grandparents. In pointing to the need of appreciating the elderly as a subject and object of a social action, let us not forget that we probably would all wish for cheerful ageing for ourselves.

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