

# The “Imperceptibly Narrowing Diamond” Generation—Adaptation Strategies of the Generation X Representatives Toward Their Old Age

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**Abstract:** Population aging is becoming one of society’s priority issues. An assumption is that it is beneficial (the benefits for the individual and society are shown in the text) for people currently of working age (representatives of Generation X) to anticipate their old age. In this article, the results of a qualitative study are presented. The aim is to identify the adaptation strategies of representatives of Generation X toward their old age. The theoretical basis was set by reflections on generations, enriched by the metaphor of the “imperceptibly narrowing diamond.” The data collection method was an unstructured interview with a standardized list of information sought, conducted with ten people (with higher education) from Generation X. As a result of the thematic analysis, two adaptation strategies toward old age emerged for the representatives of Generation X: proactive and reactive.

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starości w środowisku wiejskim i miejskim perspektywy przedstawicieli różnych pokoleń [*I Associate Old People with Living in the Countryside. And This Urban Old Age Makes me Think of Being Closed In*—About Experiencing Old Age in the Rural and Urban Environment from the Perspective of Representatives of Different Generations] (2023 in *Małe miasta. Blaski i cienie* [Small Towns: Lights and Shadows], edited by M. Zemło) and “Old Age? Definition? It Is Complicated...’: Around the Understanding of the Concept of Old Age by Representatives of Different Generations” (2022 *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL*).

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**P**opulation aging is becoming one of society’s most pressing issues. The demographics show that the whole world is aging. World Health Organization (WHO) studies (2022) state,

Today, most people can expect to live into their sixties and beyond. Every country in the world is experiencing growth in both the size and the proportion of older persons in the population. By 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or

over. At this time, the share of the population aged 60 years and over will increase from 1 billion in 2020 to 1.4 billion. By 2050, the world’s population of people aged 60 years and older will double (2.1 billion). The number of persons aged 80 years or older is expected to triple between 2020 and 2050 to reach 426 million.

The process of population aging is occurring at the fastest rate in highly developed countries. By way of illustration, in Japan, 30% of the population is al-

ready over 60 years old. In Poland, which was classified by the World Bank as a high-income country, the demographic situation also gives rise to concern. The results of the National Census conducted in Poland in 2021 indicate significant shifts in the country's population structure. As a consequence of unfavorable demographic trends, the proportion of individuals belonging to the post-working age group has increased significantly, from 16.9% to 22.3%, representing an increase of over 5%. That signifies that the number of individuals aged 60 and above increased by approximately two million over the past decade, indicating that over 20% of Poland's population is currently above the age of 60 (GUS 2022:24-25).

The progressive process of population aging generates numerous challenges (individual and social) worth analyzing in the light of theories of social change. Piotr Sztompka (1994:11 [trans. EK and AKB]) explains that,

there is no theory of social change "in general," the theory of social change "as such," there are only theories dealing with certain partial processes, aspects, or dimensions of social change. For different authors and different schools of theory, other aspects of social change turn out to be the most important.

Referring to the reflections of Alexis de Tocqueville, the Polish sociologist draws attention to civilizational and cultural changes that relate to the moral and intellectual condition of individuals (Sztompka 1994; Szacki 2003:185-191). This condition, like every aspect of society functioning, is determined by temporal factors, with the category of time being one of the key concepts linking the categories of generation, change, and aging. From

the generation's point of view, the assumptions of social change theory are salient, which show that symbols, values, rules, or beliefs shared by groups are linked to time. Those that take root in social consciousness gain normative value, while others are subject to change (Sztompka 2007:58).

In this text, we look at the beliefs/opinions of representatives of Generation X concerning old age (their own), a stage of life that is heterogeneous and diverse in terms of the biological, psychological, and social changes that take place in the functioning of the individual. We recognize the uniqueness of Generation X in the fact that its representatives are at a point in their biography when they do not yet perceive/experience these changes (and their consequences), while they are taking place irreversibly. We formulate the thesis that it is beneficial (these benefits will be highlighted in a later section) for people who are currently of working age (representatives of Generation X) to anticipate their old age (we consider this as thinking about the future). Imagining one's aging involves thinking about the future, which can be difficult on both a personal and social level (Adam 2014). According to the theory of social change (Sztompka 2007) and the theory of time perspective (Gonzalez and Zimbardo 1985), thinking about one's future determines a person's opinion of themselves, the surrounding world, and interpersonal relationships. However, people with a future perspective are characterized by the fact that they plan and organize their time and anticipate responsibilities and dangers standing in the way of their chosen goal (Zimbardo and Boyd 2009).

Barbara E. Adam distinguished two ways in which people imagine the future, which she names "future as fate" and "future as fortune." "The future

as fate” is the belief that the future has been pre-determined by the gods or ancestors. This attitude was common in pre-modern societies, but one can still see remnants of this idea in how people talk about the future (e.g., “Well, what is to happen, will happen”). According to this belief, there is little humans can do to influence what will happen (Adam 2014). “The future as fortune” is the belief that people can shape what lies ahead through their present actions and rational plans to make sure they optimize the future to come (Adam 2014).

The article aims to present the adaptation strategies of Generation X representatives toward their old age, which emerged as a result of the analysis of qualitative data collected through an unstructured interview with a standardized list of information sought (Konecki 2000:169-170).

### Generation X—The Generation of the “Imperceptibly Narrowing Diamond”

The question of generation and the characteristics of each generation has become an important organizing analytical category in recent years. A thorough conceptualization of the issue of generationality was made by Karl Mannheim. The author pointed to two rudimentary and inseparable elements that constitute a generation. The first is a common position in historical time (*generational positioning*), and the second is an awareness of the distinctiveness of that historical position, shaped by the events and experiences of a given period (*generational style*) (Mannheim 1952). Based on this approach, Krystyna Szafraniec (2022:39) explains that a generation is a group of people born at the same time who develop natural or consciously desired ties, in the formation of which the com-

measurability of their life experience and a particular type of social location play a key role. Thus, following Ryszard Kapuściński (1996:86 [trans. EK and AKB]), one can state that “a generation is more than a biological community, an identity of age. For it is also a similarity of sensibility, a similar type of imagination.” In this approach, the category of generation is used to describe social generations, that is, people born at the same time and growing up in a similar culture, who are thus subject to the influence of certain cultural and social factors. However, it should also be emphasized that individual micro-generations, or cohorts within generations, differ in terms of educational level, income level, lifestyle, et cetera.

The common denominator of the numerous definitions of the term “generation” is the reference to the category of time because it is time in all its manifestations that increasingly structures societies and the life experiences of individuals (Gillard 2004:110), while at the same time constituting a rudimentary aspect of social change (Sztompka 2021:601-602). On this basis, the classifications of generations are distinguished. A reference point for many sociological analyses is the American classification of generations, which distinguishes between Traditionalists (born between 1918 and 1945), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1995) (Wątroba 2017a:32). A general adaptation of this classification into the realities of individual societies is an oversimplification, although the search for counterparts of the American generations in Poland is justified, as the infiltration of trends characteristic of Western culture into Poland is a fact that has been extensively studied by Polish sociology (Grzeszczyk 2004).

The term Generation X was first used in 1965 by Jane Deverson and Charles Hamblett. Yet, it worked its way into popular vernacular after the release of Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. The novel tells the story of twenty-year-olds struggling with "meaningless jobs, unclear expectations, and an uncertain future" (Wątroba 2017a:131 [trans. EK and AKB]). Hence, the "X" used in the naming of the generation signifies the uncertainty of tomorrow and the uncertainty about the course of history. Recalling the social, economic, or political conditions in which the Polish Generation X grew up (the time of the Polish People's Republic [PRL]), this uncertainty was an automatic part of the biography of Poles and Polish women of the time.

Whilst characterizing the generation of people born in Poland between the second half of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1980s, it is necessary to emphasize the great internal heterogeneity, as indicated by researchers, of people from Generation X (Mach 2003:172-175), who today make up almost 28.5% of the Polish population (Local Data Bank 2023). This is also reflected in the nomenclature used. Witold Wrzesień (2005:10), for example, distinguishes three successive generations within the framework of Generation X: the Generation of '89 (people born roughly between 1964 and 1970), the Children of Transformation (born between 1971 and 1976), and the Marauders of the End of the Century (born between 1977 and 1982). The author's classification refers to the significant social changes of the 1970s. However, when describing the different generations, Wrzesień notes that despite their differences, there is a convergence of norms, values, attitudes, or realized patterns of behavior. It is worth describing

the characteristics of the representatives of Generation X in more detail.<sup>1</sup>

Szafranec (2022:48-50) explains that the ongoing socialization process of the representatives of Generation X took place in essentially poor conditions but with assured access to free education and awakening hope for a better future. Not surprisingly, the young people growing up in the 1970s are characterized by a high level of education. It should also be mentioned that the Polish People's Republic era and the period of transition were conducive to Generation X entering the labor market at the time, treating professional issues as priorities and guaranteeing stability in an uncertain everyday life (Stosik and Leśniewska 2015:186). Representatives of Generation X are also described as those who organize their work activities perfectly (Opalińska 2018:144-145). They are known by some as workaholics with a high work ethic (Smolbik-Jęczmień 2013:230). However, Generation X is also concerned with the quality of their private and family life (Hysa 2016:389). As the results of Bogdan Mach's research show, representatives of Generation X are aware that material and professional success is not enough to make them satisfied with life. The source of their satisfaction is also the quality of their family relationships (Mach 2003:161). Szafranec's research shows that the relationship between Generation X and their parents is much better now than when Generation X was growing up. The author reports that each generation is now declaratively commit-

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<sup>1</sup> The intention of the authors of the text is to sketch selected aspects of the profile of people from Generation X, through which the reader will be able to see the relationship between the socio-cultural conditions in which the process of primary socialization and growing up of the generation born in 1965-1980 took place, and their perception of the social issues analyzed in the text.

ted to caring for and helping the other and that the frequency of such attitudes outweighs expectant or demanding attitudes (Szafraniec 2022:153-154). The problems of old age (illnesses, widowhood, the feeling of not being needed, and loneliness or low pensions) are a challenge for both the people affected as well as for people from Generation X caring for older persons. Accompanying their aging parents, the younger generations also have the opportunity to imagine their old age, ranging on a continuum from the pessimistic to the optimistic (Jones 2011), shape their knowledge of their life, which constitutes a major part of the self, and constraints what we have been, what we are now, and what we might yet become (Coste et al. 2012; Kramkowska 2022).

People from Generation X—and the moment of life they are in—are perfectly described by the metaphor of the “imperceptibly narrowing diamond,” taken from the book *The Lincoln Highway* by Amor Towles. In the book, we read about the older man, Abacus, expressing his belief that everyone’s life resembles a diamond lying on its side. Initially, a person develops, increases their capabilities, and grows—the arms of the diamond expand. The first part of life is an all-encompassing, all-present, all-powerful expansion. “Beginning at a fine point, the life...expands outward” (Towles 2022:489), and a person starts to understand their strengths and weaknesses, their relationships with other people. As time passes, “proceeding into the world” (Towles 2022:489), the individual performs a series of deeds independently and merrily with others, gains honors and accolades, but also experiences failures and downfalls. “But at some untold moment, the two rays that define the outer limits of this widening world...simultaneously turn a corner and begin to converge”

(Towles 2022:489). A person’s capabilities begin to narrow, they begin to lose, to falter—the arms of the diamond imperceptibly move toward one another. Over the course of a person’s life, they may not notice this and may not feel that the process of “narrowing the diamond” has begun. Older Abacus explains,

The manner in which the convergence takes you by surprise, that is the cruelest part. And yet it’s almost unavoidable. For at the moment when the turning begins, the two opposing rays of your life are so far from each other you could never discern the change in their trajectory. And in those first years, as the rays begin to angle inward, the world still seems so open, you have no reason to suspect its diminishment. But one day, one day years after the convergence has begun, you cannot only sense the inward trajectory of the walls, you can begin to see the terminal point in the offing even as the terrain that remains before you begins to shrink at an accelerating pace. [Towles 2022:491]

This may be the moment for those in Generation X—they are experiencing a period of being fully active and open to the world, while at the same time seeing glimpses of their aging. Old age, according to Amos Towles (2022:492), is the phase when life “had shrunk from the world itself, to their country, to their county, to their home, and finally to a single room where...they are destined to end their days.”

### Old Age and Adaptation to It

Old age is a stage of life that is the culmination of aging processes at the biological, psychological, or social level, resulting in a violation of the biological and mental balance, with no possibility

of counteracting this mechanism<sup>2</sup> (Pędich 1996; Kocemba 2000; Bugajska 2012; Kramkowska 2016). Old age is, therefore, a specific state of the individual, reflecting a significant accumulation of signs of the aging process. However,

aging and the life course are also social processes because age is a structural feature of societies. The dynamic aspects of aging at both individual and societal levels require our particular attention. That is, new cohorts of people are born, grow up and older together, and move through the age structure of the population. These ideas also heightened the awareness of the need to not only understand the unique characteristics of particular cohorts as they aged, but also to understand the differential effects of social change on adjacent cohorts. [Settersten and Angel 2011:5]

Analyzing the strategies of adaptation to old age among members of Generation X requires an understanding of aging and old age as social phenomena. Moreover, adaptation to old age, understood as how individuals or groups adjust to living in conditions different from those they have previously experienced, is both possible and desira-

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the variation in the aging process and the subsequent increasing dependency of older persons, old age is divided into the so-called third and fourth age. The third age is a period of active functional independence, whereby individuals can perform the majority of daily activities without assistance. This is accompanied by the ability to enjoy the benefits of retired life and economic dependency, characterized by the receipt of public transfers (pensions, disability pensions, survivors' pensions). The second part is the so-called fourth age, which encompasses the period during which an individual's autonomy and capacity to care for themselves are significantly constrained. During this phase, older persons are compelled to rely on the assistance of others and are also economically dependent. The demarcation between the third and fourth age is most frequently established at 80 years of age in gerontological literature (Gawron, Klimczuk, and Szweda-Lewandowska 2021).

ble (Bromley 1969:132-139). Adaptation is a broad concept analyzed in the literature, for example, in cultural (Berry 1997) or migration contexts (Danilewicz 2010; Winięcka 2016). It is process-oriented. Therefore, when analyzing adaptation in old age, the said process should be considered concerning three aspects: biological, in the form of adaptation to physiological changes in the body; psychological, referring to changes in the sphere of psychological processes, personality, and/or subjective experiences; or social, manifested in adaptation to new roles, social, occupational, or economic status (Kucharewicz 2015:228).

Analyzing adaptations to old age undoubtedly makes sense when discussing people who have entered the final stage of life. A common assumption is that the conventional start of old age is entering retirement age, that is, turning 60 or 65. The text applies to younger people who will enter this phase of life in the near or distant future. Representatives of Generation X can, at most, anticipate their old age or adopt adaptive strategies toward their old age, that is, purposeful, spread-out activities aimed at achieving a chosen goal (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001).

## Research Design, Sampling, and Ethical Issues

The research was carried out using an unstructured interview with a standardized list of information sought (Konecki 2000:169-170) to answer the research question: *Which adaptation strategies toward their old age do Generation X representatives display?*

The data presented in this article are part of a larger qualitative research project on four genera-

tions’ perceptions of old age and older persons.<sup>3</sup> The article only contains statements by the representatives of Generation X, that is, people aged 42 to 57. It is a generation at a peculiar point in its life. Turning the “magical 40,” the halfway point in life, the tendency to self-reflection, greater or lesser self-awareness of their needs, reviewing past achievements, and setting goals for the second half of life (Bee 2004; Giddens and Sutton 2020:301-302) appear to postpone “diamond narrowing.” It is also typical for members of Generation X to care for relatives (growing children, aging parents) or to face numerous social challenges determined, among other things, by the progressive aging of the society (fluidity of the pension system, economic situation of the country).

During the interviews, without being asked about it (such a question was not included in the interview script), ten of the sixteen interviewees

<sup>3</sup> The research addressed the issue of old age and older persons as remembered by the interviewees from their childhood and their perceptions of contemporary old age and today’s older persons. Both temporal perspectives, i.e., the retrospective aspect and the presentist aspect, dealt with three research areas, i.e., the generalized characteristics of old age and older persons (including the qualities of old age and older persons, and their social perception), old age and older persons in the family, as well as the image of old age and the appearance of the aging senior body. The empirical material was collected between January and April 2022. Representatives of four generations were invited to participate in the qualitative research, whose typology was adopted from Wiesław Wątroba (2017b): (1) Traditionalists (born between 1918 and 1945), (2) Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), (3) Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and (4) Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1995). Sixteen representatives of each generation took part in the research. To estimate the characteristics of the hidden intra-generational relations/networks, the snowball method was used to reach the interviewees, taking into account the assumption that each generation should be represented by eight women and eight men, eight urban residents and eight rural residents (each of the interviewees recommended further individuals for the study). We could say that the principle of variability was invoked. A total of 64 interviews were conducted.

raised the topic of their aging, their old age, and their preparation for it. The researcher followed this thread by inquiring about the meaning/context of the message (statement), asking, among other things, the question, “Do you think about your old age? If so, what kind of thoughts are those? What do you think about it? What feelings do you experience?” It is this content that informs this article. In addition to the criterion of belonging to the selected generation, other important characteristics determining the selection of all individuals for the study were the gender and place of residence of the participants (urban/rural). Among the ten interviewees who raised the issue of their old age, there were five women and five men; seven were city dwellers, and three lived in the countryside.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants**

No.	Sex	Age	Place of residence	Education
1	woman	48	city	higher education
2	woman	44	city	higher education
3	man	44	city	higher education
4	woman	55	city	higher education
5	man	42	village	higher education
6	man	48	city	higher education
7	woman	42	village	higher education
8	man	42	city	higher education
9	woman	45	village	higher education
10	man	57	city	higher education

Source: self-elaboration.



## Ethical Issues

Each person who gave informed consent to be interviewed was informed about the aims of the study and how the information provided would be used. In addition, everyone was assured that the anonymity and confidentiality of the research would be maintained. All interviewees agreed to have the interview recorded, transcribed, and excerpts used in academic publications. To ensure confidentiality, the researchers use codes (narrator no. 1, narrator no. 2) during the analysis and the presentation of the data. In presenting the findings, the researchers aimed to ensure that the themes that emerged and their descriptions were documented in the empirical data collected.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006:79), was used to analyze the data collected. In our analysis of themes, we used an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), deriving the themes from the data. The analysis of the data began with the first researcher selecting excerpts from the transcribed interviews in which the narrators talk about their old age and/or aging. The researchers then read the interview transcripts individually, independently of each other, assigning descriptive codes to the interview excerpts. Afterward, the researchers shared their codes (on a shared disk) and discussed them, establishing categories and assigning them to the initial map of themes related to the research problems (Braun and Clarke 2006). Subsequently, the authors jointly performed the analysis involving continuous back and forth be-

tween the entire dataset and the coded data fragments to confirm the validity of the emergence of a given theme, its content, and the documentation of the themes in the empirical data. An integral part of the analysis was the writing of memos (short analytical notes on thoughts, ideas, and questions), which started with noting ideas and potential coding schemes in phase one and continued throughout coding, theme emergence, and text development. Memos were created by each author, with subsequent ones reinforcing the themes and addressing the formulated questions. The analysis of the data by several researchers simultaneously, as well as the joint identification of themes, served to ensure the validity and reliability of the research.

## Adaptation of the Representatives of Generation X Toward Their Old Age and the Strategies Resulting from It

The purpose of this article is to identify the adaptation strategies to the old age of the representatives of Generation X, who raised this issue themselves during the interviews. The average age of the participants in the study is 46.7 years, so they are not old. On the contrary, they are fully productive and professionally engaged. However, the diversity and complexity of the old age life stage means that it is possible to prepare for it in a variety of ways. The analysis of the interviewees' statements made it possible to identify two strategies of the narrators' adaptation to their old age: (1) the interviewees' proactive strategy for adapting to their old age and (2) the interviewees' reactive strategy for adapting to their old age. Within each of the key themes, the participants' experiences and insights are discussed under emerging sub-themes (Table 2).

**Table 2. The thematic content of interviewees’ anticipatory strategies for adapting to their old age**

Key themes	Sub-themes
Interviewees’ proactive strategies for adapting to their aging	Mindfulness as a strategy for consciously being “here and now”
	Building and maintaining relationships with loved ones
	Concern for their well-being
	Financial security
Interviewees’ reactive strategies for adapting to their old age	Passive acceptance of change
	Anxiety and escape response to symptoms of aging

Source: Self-elaboration.

### Generation X Representatives’ Proactive Strategies for Adapting to Their Old Age

This section reveals the proactive strategy of Generation X representatives to their old age in which four sub-themes emerge: (1) mindfulness as a strategy for consciously being “here and now”; (2) building and maintaining relationships with loved ones; (3) caring for their well-being; and (4) financial security. This proactive strategy is based on the analysis of factors to anticipate/shape their future through their present actions and rational plans to optimize the future or likely scenarios. In

the participants’ statements, old age appears to be a time for which they can/should prepare themselves by reflecting on their future, which might be prompted, among other things, by the observation of today’s older persons.

I’m not afraid of my own old age. I think I have these observations because I like to watch people, and in my mind, I process everything, like, right?...I look at others, and I have some thoughts. I imagine what it might be like for me. [narrator no. 1]

#### *Mindfulness as a Strategy for Consciously Being “Here and Now”*

The ability to stop and see the “here and now” becomes a sign of maturity, resulting from a reflective response to difficult experiences (e.g., Covid-19). The sense of danger and the inevitable rapid passage of time prompts an attentiveness for which the usual, professionally- and family-active representatives of Generation X do not have time. Let us recall the longer statement of narrator no. 9.

It seems to me, at least I’m at that stage of a more mature life at the moment, that, at least in my case, a lot of it was caused by Covid, that I had the opportunity to stop, to slow down, not just work, work and work. But to stand back, to stop and see that, actually, a lot of time has flown by in my life. I was focused on work, and that work took that time that, for example, I don’t know... we have two children, and I didn’t even have time to see when they grew up when they grew up, when they became adults. And now, I’ve actually slowed down in my life... because I need time to be with my family... I have the time at the moment, the kind of maturity to stop and look at my boys and notice how they think, how they talk. [narrator no. 9]

This reflective reference to the inevitability and pace of time passing sensitizes people to the fleetingness of time, contributes to making conscious choices, and clarifies the values people stand for, to which they want to commit themselves.

Mindfulness to the “here and now” also manifests itself in the acceptance of the laws of life, which include passing and aging. One narrator describes it as follows.

But I don't... I don't know, some people, for example, turn forty and oh... get depressed, oh dear, I'm already forty... And I don't think like that, with categories like that, that this is old age, that I'm already falling apart, that this is the end of my life. It's simple, as long as I live, that's how long I'm going to live, in old age or in this advanced age. [narrator no. 2]

The acceptance of both what is happening now and what will be happening protects people from the anxiety associated with an unknown future and allows them to see life as a holistic process.

### *Building and Maintaining Relationships with Loved Ones*

Anticipating their old age, the participants in the study (mainly women, only one man) emphasized the importance of building and maintaining relationships with their loved ones (children and grandchildren). They want to be a part of their lives in the future, which they see as a source of positive energy and joy (narrator no. 1). The family members that the study participants are thinking about are mainly their future grandchildren, for whom the narrators want to be companions in the process of their growing up and everyday life. This is what one narrator said.

I think I would like to be a “warm” grandmother in my old age. I'd like to look after my grandchildren and spend my old age with my family...Above all, I'd like to be the kind of grandmother that the children not only come to but also enjoy visiting. I would like them to come to me. [narrator no. 7]

Representatives of Generation X, while being fully active, are aware of their numerous commitments and the permanent lack of time for themselves and their loved ones (Wątroba 2022:83), which is why they define future family time as thoughtful, unhurried being together (especially with their grandchildren, to whom they want to show different facets of the world). Another interviewee said,

I would like to show a lot of things to my grandchildren, you know, and to explain things, right? Because I understand that my children, my daughters, my sons-in-law, they won't have time to do things like, for example, talk about flowers, about beetles, those things that I would love to tell my grandchildren about. [narrator no. 4]

The role of the “warm” grandmother is socially desirable and is often an antidote to the caring problems of busy parents (Przygoda 2015; Wiczkowska 2017). However, there are women among the participants who want to redefine the role of the “traditional” grandmother to secure their autonomy in their relationships with their children and grandchildren. One interviewee emphatically stated,

I tell my daughters that they shouldn't think that I am going to babysit their children all the time. I say it straight away. I think I will only be there to add to the upbringing, to show the world because often

parents on the run don't have time to do this. They just think in this way about upbringing: feed, do the homework, put to bed, sleep, and the next day repeat. I would have time to show something different. But I don't want to be a full-time babysitter. No, no!  
[narrator no. 4]

### *Concern for Their Well-Being*

Concern for their well-being (physical health, spiritual health, mental health, or pursuit of their passions) is an important thematic thread in the process of adapting to their old age. The participants in the study are already taking care of their physical fitness to age as slowly as possible and to be not only motivated to do things but also to enjoy doing them (narrator no. 3). They also see the source and effect of emancipation (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2015) in pursuing their passions, devoting a preferred amount of time to their hobbies, which is sometimes difficult at earlier stages of life (narrator no. 4, narrator no. 9, narrator no.10). Old age is, therefore, associated by interviewees with “time for” hobbies, observing the world, experiencing life, spending time with themselves and others. Nowadays, Generation X, living in a hurry, does not have time for it and even misses it. One woman said,

I wish that during this old age of ours, that we had more time for ourselves... Because, now, as my husband works, I work...we would like to have an RV and explore the world, enjoy the world, feel that air, feel that breath. [narrator no. 9]

The participants associate the pursuit of their passions with the hope of well-being in old age and a way of counteracting potential boredom (narrator no. 4). While defining passion, Maria Czerepa-

niak-Walczak (2015:57 [trans. EK and AKB]) shows its qualities and emphasizes that it is

the driving force behind human activity, the will to act, the way to find and give meaning to life, as well as the courage to transcend oneself. It is also a factor in inspiring others, motivating them to take up challenges, and encouraging them to do things they have not done before.

The pursuit of a passion can serve to restore a sense of agency. The act of “holding on” to what is perceived as beneficial or enjoyable contributes to alleviating emerging fears about the prospect of old age (narrator no. 10). The unpredictability of the future is, in fact, a source of anxiety for many individuals. To alleviate this anxiety, participants engage in a variety of activities, including taking care of their personal or spiritual development, which may include praying and entrusting their lives to God (narrator no. 4). One man revealed that faith is a significant value in his life, as it provides him with a sense of respite, instills hope, and offers a form of escape. He also stated that without faith, his outlook on the future would appear more dismal (narrator no. 6).

### *Financial Security*

The last proactive way in which participants anticipate their old age is through utilitarian activities aimed at financially securing life after retirement. This was mentioned by two men aware of the country's socio-economic situation resulting from the progressive aging of the Polish population and rising inflation. The following is a statement from one of them.

Well, on the other hand, probably in the economic context, because when you think about it, I'm saving

for the future...I wouldn't like to not be able to afford something. Because I know that the country will not be able to provide everything just like that, that this replacement rate is going to get lower and lower. [narrator no. 3]

The other admitted, "I'm financially secure, so, hopefully, this will be a time for me to enjoy life" (narrator no. 8). None of the women reflecting on their old age raised the issue of financial security. It seems, therefore, that social roles, traditionally associated with the representatives of a specific sex, are still present in the consciousness of Poles and Polish women (Giddens 2012:320-322).

Securing finances for the future was seen by the second man quoted as the realization of the conviction that the individual is the master of their destiny, and it is up to them to anticipate potential risks. Undertaking activities that might be a form of mitigating the unpredictability of fate is a sign of a proactive attitude toward life, of which old age is, after all, a part.

Because I say, you know, old age can surprise you. It's just that you just have to say certain things, these impulses that are out there somewhere, hunting us, you just have to say, I'm in charge, and not someone else. [narrator no. 8]

### **The Reactive Strategies of Anticipating Their Old Age by the Representatives of Generation X**

This section presents the interviewees' reactive strategies for adapting to their old age, based on the assumption that there is little a person can do to influence their future or the course it may take. In other words, reactive strategies entail responding to changes initiated by external factors. Two

sub-themes were identified based on this theme: 1) passive acceptance of the changes taking place and 2) anxiety and escape response to symptoms of aging.

#### *Passive Acceptance of Change*

The stress theory of aging posits that a decline in general fitness, loss of previous mobility, or level of bodily functioning (Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin 1968) constitute significant stressors that are a part of the everyday life of an aging person. Those who fail to develop constructive responses to change typically accept the consequences of progressive aging processes passively (Kucharewicz 2015:228-229). This way of functioning was indicated by the participants of the study, who mentioned a lack of motivation to act or a sense of boredom with activities that had previously brought them enjoyment. This is what one participant admitted, "I think that I have already started to get older...I think that morally or mentally I'm already wondering if this world view of mine is still expanding" (narrator no. 3). Seeing changes in himself seems to be a difficult truth for the narrator to come to terms with, as he associates his old age with a lack of motivation, joy, and surprise. He is depressed by this narrowing of life's dynamic. The passive acceptance of the consequences of aging by the next interviewee (narrator no. 10) took the form of an awareness of the typical characteristics of old age (health problems, illnesses, and physical infirmities) and the difficulty of predicting the course of events in this particular area. As a result, although he was aware of the situation, the man did not try to introduce behaviors that could help. He let it run its course. Perhaps this is because the process of "narrowing the diamond" is not yet acute enough to force activity.

### *Anxiety and Escape Response to Symptoms of Aging*

The social perception of old age is still characterized by the notion of painful loss, encompassing the deterioration of physical and mental health, fitness, vitality, and physical attractiveness. Furthermore, it is linked to emotional distress and existential anguish (Adamczyk 2019:142-143). A review of the literature reveals that attitudes and stereotypes toward older age groups are similar across cultures, with a notable shift toward more negative attitudes toward older persons (Weiss and Zhang 2020:411). The prevalence of these associations leads to fear among people who are at the threshold of old age and who perceive themselves as undergoing aging processes (Straś-Romanowska 2000:270). A man from Generation X displays an anxious attitude when he states, “I often think about my old age, and what bothers me is that in a while I will also be infirm, and what should I do? Who will assume responsibility for my care?” (narrator no. 6). The anxiety reactions expressed by this and other interviewees manifested as concerns about potential dependence on others due to anticipated loss of health or loved ones (narrator no. 4). The narrators described this anxiety as a subconscious phenomenon, an instinctual and involuntary response (narrator no. 10). Therefore, the aforementioned concerns pertain to the biological aspect of the changes that are intrinsic to the aging process. That suggests that this aspect is of greater importance than the psychological or social aspects.

Additionally, the narrators employed a strategy of retreat. One of the narrators articulated this sentiment: “I try to push away my fears, to hide them a little bit deeper somewhere” (narrator no. 4), whi-

le another one said, “The circumstances diverge when children are present and when an individual is unaccompanied. It is evident that the scenarios in question can vary considerably. At this point, I am attempting to disassociate myself from these scenarios” (narrator no. 6). Barbara Adam (2014) posits that one of the reasons why individuals may be reluctant to contemplate their aging is a fatalistic outlook, characterized by the perception that since there is no possibility of action, there is no merit in considering the future. The only recourse is to await the unfolding of events and to attempt to make the best of what occurs.

One form of escapist response to the anticipation of old age is an acceptance of its unpredictability. As one of the men interviewed said,

for me, at the moment, my old age may be black, it may be pink, it may be whatever because I don't know what it will be like. For me, it is one question mark. I don't know if I will live to see it. Maybe it will be better, maybe it will be worse. It's hard for me to say, to be so precise. [narrator no. 5]

The narrator explains the unpredictability and potentiality of the future by the moment of life he is currently in, as indicated by the words “for me, at this moment.” This confirms that the participants belong to the “imperceptibly narrowing diamond” generation who perceive the age range of 40-50 as premature for contemplating their advanced age. Even when such introspection arises, they defer it, assuming that there will still be time for it. To illustrate this further, we cite another statement:

I think about my old age. I would like to stay healthy, and if I do, I think I will not be bored in my old age...

You know, that's how I think, at least now, having that perspective. Well, I hope it is not so close to that kind of old age yet. [narrator no. 4]

The hope that old age will be kind and active is mixed with a sense of diminishing worldview, aspirations, energy, et cetera.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The interviews with Generation X representatives presented above indicate that the issue of their old age is a topic of reflection for them. They are conscious of the intricacies of the aging process and the plethora of difficulties encountered by older persons. During the course of the interviews, the participants were not prompted to consider which stage of old age they were anticipating, whether that be the so-called third or fourth age. In the narrators' statements, old age is presented as a stage of life that comes naturally but is not anticipated due to the inherent narrowing of possibilities, the imperceptible "narrowing of the arms of the diamond." However, each of the planes of change accompanying old age, namely, biological, psychological, and social, was evident in the reminiscences of the interviewees. Additionally, each of the changes associated with aging—biological, psychological, and social—was evident in the statements of those interviewed.

The reactive strategies for adapting to their old age, as evidenced by passivity toward processes occurring or by anxiety reactions, illustrate a narrowing down of old age to the aspect of biological old age. Interviewees expressed concerns about potential physical infirmity as a consequence of wear and tear of the body and the inevitability of the aging process. Only one of the men displaying inactivity

caused by discouragement and a decrease in self-motivation makes reference to the psychological aspect of age-related changes. The uncertainty of the future is one of the aforementioned defining characteristics of Generation X, originating in the conditions of their socialization process (Wątroba 2022:90-92). This is also evident in the statements of several narrators. A larger proportion of the interviewees, however, adopt a different, proactive perspective on their old age.

Proactive strategies for adapting to one's old age, which take the form of paying attention to the "here and now," building and maintaining relationships with loved ones, caring for one's well-being, and financial security, encompass all of the aforementioned aspects of adapting to old age (biological, psychological, and social). The following strategies may be employed to address the need for security at the individual and community levels. These findings are consistent with US analyses of individuals aged 35-64 years, which suggest that Generation X is better prepared for retirement than Millennials in terms of safer portfolio allocations. Income, risk tolerance, and college education are positively associated with retirement preparedness (Qi, Chatterjee, and Liu 2022). The exponential relationship between educational attainment and health status was confirmed by the nationwide PolSenior 2 study (Błądowski et al. 2021), which demonstrates that education is a significant variable influencing the quality of functioning in older age. Individuals with higher education levels tend to exhibit superior health outcomes compared to those with lower levels of education. The Generation X representatives interviewed have all attained higher education, which is likely to influence their attitudes toward old age and their adaptation to it. The participants in the study expressed the

hope that by engaging in conscious preparation for old age, they would be able to avoid the negative consequences that are habitually or stereotypically associated with older people. “Older age groups are perceived as slow, senile, and unattractive” (Weiss and Zhang 2020:410). These findings corroborate those of Mariola Świdorska (2014:150 [trans. EK and AKB]) from almost a decade ago, who discovered (through a survey) that when contemplating their future old age, individuals aged 40 years old aspire to

achieve inner peace and harmony; spend time taking care of themselves and their passions; find time for their loved ones and for themselves (retirement); develop spiritually, which would result in achieving wisdom; continually deepen their understanding of themselves; and build the inner strength needed to act, this constant desire to act. Their greatest hope is that there will still be something interesting to do or experience.

The consideration of one’s advanced age, which motivates concern for financial responsibility, was a phenomenon observed exclusively among men (2 individuals), with no evidence of such contemplation among women. It was deemed appropriate for the female narrators to consider the social implications of old age in relation to the role of the grandmother, which has traditionally been associated with older women (it is noteworthy that none of the male participants referenced the role of the grandfather). One of the participants in the study proposed a redefinition of the role of the grandmother, suggesting that it should be viewed as fit, active, and fulfilling her passions rather than solely as a role that involves devoting time to her children and grandchildren (see: Świdorska 2014:158).

It can thus be concluded that the surveyed representatives of Generation X, being aware of their current stage of life and the one that lies ahead, observe the lives of older persons and the situations that fill their everyday lives. They are aware of the inevitable narrowing of life opportunities as the years pass. This recognition encourages reflection on the basis of individual decisions and systemic solutions. Such reflection and active adaptation strategies are indicative of maturity and higher education. They contribute to reflection on cultural and civilizational changes (Sztompka 1994) and conscious relationship building, including engagement in a career (Sandeen 2008) and retirement. The anticipation of potential scenarios pertaining to their future old age may potentially yield solutions that would benefit a considerable number of individuals.

### **What Might the Benefits Be of Thinking about Their Old Age by the Representatives of the “Imperceptibly Narrowing Diamond” Generation, and Who Might Benefit from Them?**

In light of the inevitable and initially imperceptible narrowing of the “arms of the diamond” (Towles 2022), we put forth the thesis that it is beneficial for individuals to (1) be aware of the process, (2) anticipate their future, and (3) prepare for it in a conscious manner. The aforementioned research indicates that discussing old age as a social phenomenon, including the aging of loved ones, provides the impetus for individuals to reflect on their aging process. The capacity to anticipate future developments and requirements is crucial for both individual and societal well-being, as it offers advantages to both the individual and the wider society.



### *Individual Benefits of Anticipating Old Age*

The anticipation of their old age by people of working age can become a moment of change in their lives, as well as an inspiration to move toward more responsible thinking about their future (Shirani et al. 2017). As life expectancy continues to increase, there is a growing emphasis on maintaining a high quality of life for as long as possible. This encompasses not only the preservation of physical fitness but also the ability to lead an active lifestyle. One potential solution is the human augmentation sector, which involves technologies designed to enhance human capabilities. The principal objective of these technologies is to boost human performance, health, and quality of life. Notable examples of human augmentation technology include devices such as cochlear implants and robotic limbs (Raisamo et al. 2019). Technological advancement enables individuals to achieve more and more, including enhancing or repairing their senses (via a brain-computer interface), motor functions, activities, or cognitive processes (Zheng et al. 2017; Raisamo et al. 2019). This domain is witnessing rapid and far-reaching developments with both anticipated and unforeseen consequences.

Less invasive and within the reach of most individuals is conscious attention to the quality of their life and health, undertaking regular physical activity, undergoing medical check-ups, as well as practicing mindfulness or positive thinking, which is being popularized today. The WHO (1948) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being of the individual. In addition to the accurate presentation of health in the context of the three related components (physical, mental, and social aspect),

it is salient to recognize the importance of the individual's assessment of their health (well-being aspect). Polish national surveys indicate that 35- to 54-year-olds rate their physical health best compared to other age groups, that is, 55% of them consider it to be very good to good (*Narodowy Test Zdrowia Polaków* [National Test for Poles' Health] 2023:48). The respondents' self-declarations may be indicative of their awareness of health issues and their responsible actions in this regard. It is also possible that they benefit from solutions that were not available to earlier generations (such as care for a healthy diet, easier access to reliable information, or specialized medical care), which positions them in a more favorable position at the outset of the journey toward a healthy old age. Concurrently, the contemporary focus on health can serve as a means of confronting the possibility of an eventual period of dependency or illness in later life. While such an eventuality cannot be eliminated, the probability of its occurrence can be reduced.

Kathleen Riach (2023) posits that contemplating one's advanced age in the context of one's professional pursuits can facilitate introspective reflection on one's identity in the present moment and potential future self. As previously stated, Generation X is adept at managing its professional activities, demonstrating a high level of commitment and engagement (Opalińska 2018:144-145). Concurrently, they prioritize the quality of their family life and the nurturing of their relationships with their aging parents (Szafranec 2022:153-154). Caring for interpersonal relationships, including family relationships, which are based on mutual understanding, improves the quality of these relationships and increases the likelihood of implementing solutions that ensure that people from

Generation X, who often take on the role of carers, are not deprived of the opportunity to freely manage their time, whether this is related to professional activity or their interests (hobbies, passions), while at the same time fulfilling the expectations placed on them by the representatives of older generations. It is evident that the intricacy of the challenges associated with providing care services and support to older persons to ensure a satisfactory quality of life has a profound impact on the functioning of families (Fihel and Okólski 2018). One potential solution is the establishment of intergenerational relationships founded upon mutual understanding and respect over an extended period. Moreover, this approach can convey a clear message from Generation X to younger generations that a dependent family member should be provided with care. This exemplification of conduct may represent a strategy employed by representatives of Generation X to “secure” their future old age within the familial space of their adult children.

### *Social Benefits of Anticipating Old Age*

The phenomenon of population aging is pervasive and far-reaching, with a multitude of long-term consequences (Błędowski et al. 2021). To address these challenges, it is essential to implement strategies that are proactive and forward-thinking. Our proposed solution is to anticipate the needs of an aging population. One potential consequence of such an approach could be the creation of innovative social solutions for the development of both formal (institutional) and informal (home) care for older persons, or the provision of funding for future care (Jones 2011; Kramkowska 2023). Wiesław Wątroba (2017b:92-93 [trans. EK and AKB]) presents a compelling argument.

The growing cost of living for an increasing number of advanced age groups, with a simultaneous decrease in the number of young, professionally active individuals, who could cover these costs with the products of their work, lead not so much to a growing generational debt as to an economic and, as a result, a social catastrophe with a very strong threat of generational antagonism...Radical institutional changes are necessary. New social institutions are needed that would define the generational obligations of the younger toward the older...Institutional solutions are needed that would promote new family models and a new division of social roles within them.

The current representatives of Generation X, who are fully active in their professional lives, could become agents of positive social change.

Furthermore, individuals must contemplate the future in the context of their advanced age at the earliest possible stage, specifically during their formative years in an educational setting. For example, educators may employ foresight methods<sup>4</sup> to prepare young people to anticipate old age (their own and other people's) through the application of design and systems thinking to understand the changes taking place and to develop action strategies. Heather P. Lacey, Dylan L. Smith, and Peter A. Ubel (2006), and Shimshon M. Neikrug (2003) posit that young people's lack of awareness that they will eventually become old reinforces ageism, intergenerational conflicts, and misunderstandings. If one does not believe that one will ever become old, it is more challenging

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<sup>4</sup> Foresight helps to navigate an uncertain future, analyze actions taken in the present, and identify patterns of change that could have a significant, lasting impact on the future (Foresight Report 2023).

to interact with older individuals in a manner that acknowledges their humanity and complexity. Educators can facilitate the process of envisioning and constructing a future that aligns with the aspirations of young people. The implementation of social innovation approaches across various educational disciplines may have a more profound impact on resilience and sustainability (Foresight Report 2023).

Old age education also has a health aspect. The increasing lifespan of human beings is a fact. It is, therefore, necessary to foster health-conscious attitudes and habits among the youngest generations and create awareness of personal responsibility for the quality of life and health (physical and mental) so that future generations of older persons are fit and self-sufficient for as long as possible (Syrek 2022). As early as 1969, Talcott Parsons argued that public health is a resource that determines the prosperity and development of societies. Anticipating one's old age can be a way of making this a reality. It is likely that healthy,

fit citizens will show an interest in prolonging their professional activity, resulting in the sustainability of the state's pension system, the indicated labor saturation (Szukalski 2023), and, in the broader/longer perspective, an increase in social welfare.

## Directions for Further Research

The research was conducted exclusively with individuals who had obtained a higher education qualification. It would be beneficial to conduct further research with a more diverse group of participants, which could contribute to the development of additional strategies for anticipating one's old age. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to conduct research in other regions of Poland and engage in international comparative study in countries with comparable socio-political conditions. That would provide insights into the extent to which the adaptation strategies of Generation X members toward their old age, as outlined in the text, are objectively defined.

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