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Challenges in social work with older people

Wyzwania w pracy socjalnej z osobami starszymi

Abstract

Aim. The aim of this article is to discuss the challenges in social work with older people. In my considerations, I start from the need for acceptance, feeling important, and being needed, which lies in every person. The background to these considerations is the demographic situation in Poland and the most important concepts related to old age as a stage of human life. Then, I present the main areas in social work with older people, showing them in the context of the difficulties seniors face in Poland. The challenges in social work revolve around giving older people the feeling that they are important and that their life, despite various problems and difficulties, has meaning and value. This is a task not only for social workers and representatives of other institutions whose activities focus on working with and for older people but also for society as a whole.

Methods and materials. The article reviews and analyzes selected publications on old age and the broadly understood situation of older people, as well as the difficulties they

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encounter on a daily basis. Based on these sources, conclusions were formulated regarding the challenges in social work with this group of clients.

Results and conclusion. The challenge in social work with older people is primarily a thorough analysis of their life situation. First of all, of course, what is important in social security and at the same time motivating, activating, but above all, building the feeling that she is important, needed, valued, and that she is not alone.

Keywords: old age, elderly person, aging, senior, social work, challenge.

Abstrakt

Cel. Celem niniejszego artykułu są wyzwania w pracy socjalnej z osobami starszymi. W swoich rozważaniach wychodzę od potrzeby akceptacji, bycia ważnym i potrzebnym, która tkwi w każdym człowieku. Tłem do tych rozważań jest naświetlenie sytuacji demograficznej Polski oraz najistotniejszych pojęć związanych ze starością jako etapem życia człowieka. Następnie ukazuję główne obszary w pracy socjalnej z osobami starszymi. Pokazuję je w kontekście trudności, z którymi mierzą się seniorzy w Polsce. Wyzwania w pracy socjalnej oscylują zatem wokół stworzenia osobie starszej poczucia, że jest ważna, że jej życie, pomimo różnych problemów i trudności, ma sens. To zadanie nie tylko dla pracowników socjalnych i przedstawicieli innych instytucji, których działania koncentrują się wokół pracy z osobami starszymi i na ich rzecz, lecz także dla całego społeczeństwa.

Metody i materiały. W artykule dokonano przeglądu i analizy wybranych publikacji na temat starości oraz szeroko rozumianej sytuacji osób starszych i trudności, z którymi spotykają się na co dzień. W oparciu o nie sformułowano wnioski dotyczące wyzwań w pracy socjalnej z tą grupą klientów.

Wyniki i wnioski. Wyzwaniem w pracy socjalnej z osobami starszymi jest przede wszystkim wnikliwa analiza ich położenia życiowego. W pierwszej kolejności ważne jest oczywiście zabezpieczenie społeczne, a jednocześnie motywowanie, aktywizowanie, ale przede wszystkim budowanie w nich poczucia, że są ważni, potrzebni oraz że nie są sami.

Słowa kluczowe: starość, osoba starsza, senior, starzenie się, praca socjalna, wyzwanie.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the most important challenges in social work with the elderly. To do so, it is necessary to define social work and emphasise its multidimensionality, and then to identify and analyse the main problems that are the starting point for the present considerations.

Among the most important issues related to the broadly understood life situation of the elderly, the following should be mentioned as determinants of their daily functioning:

- the current demographic situation in Poland and its consequences for social work with the elderly;
- the social roles of the elderly in a changing social reality;
- health issues;
- financial difficulties that are a common experience for the elderly;
- changes caused by retirement, including relational changes;
- loneliness as an experience of the elderly.

The analysis of the aforementioned issues, which are also the research questions formulated in this paper, is a necessary element in identifying the most important challenges faced by social workers dealing with the elderly. It also provides a context for considering the most important needs of senior citizens and identifying which of these needs should be prioritised.

The idea of social work as multidimensional customer support

Social work covers a wide range of activities, far exceeding mere material support, including both activities undertaken for the benefit of specific individuals and families, as well as work with the local community, which is intended to contribute to the effective satisfaction of the needs of its members. Social work can be provided not only by social workers but also by any institution and organisation that focuses on activating and developing the independence of individuals and families in its activities. It is worth taking a broader look at the idea of social work and the fact that it largely takes place in the local environment. Therefore, it can be assumed that it can be undertaken daily by anyone who can recognise the needs of another person and is open to acting in their favour and favour of society as a whole. Anna Michalska (2022) mentions four main areas of social work, thus demonstrating its complexity and multidimensionality. The first of these are the problems listed in statutory form, entitling potential clients to benefit from a specific form of support, depending on the circumstances. The next are all kinds of activities that complement the social assistance system. The next area of social work is “social problems in social work research [...]” (Michalska, 2022, p. 36). The fourth dimension is the experience of social workers and people representing other helping professions, which they use in their professional work to solve problems “[...] based on original methods of building organisational structures” (Michalska, 2022, p. 36).

According to Article 45(1) of the *Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2004 roku o pomocy społecznej* [Act of March 12, 2004, on social welfare], institutions and organisations' activities relevant to meeting community members' needs social work is provided to improve the functioning of individuals and families in their social environment. Social work is carried out:

- 1) with individuals and families to develop or strengthen their activity and independence in life;
- 2) with the local community to ensure cooperation and coordination of institutions and organisations' activities relevant to meeting community members' needs (*Obwieszczenie* [Announcement], 2023).

The most important challenge in social work is to make people aware of their agency, to make them realise that they can face everyday challenges on their own and that their life, despite various circumstances, has meaning. Those who work with the elderly are also faced with this challenge. This is particularly important today due to the changes in civilisation in the modern world. Older people often have to face the challenge of adapting to civilisational and cultural changes. Many of them experience difficulties in using information technology and technical equipment. These are "sometimes traumatic experiences for seniors" (Brzezińska, 2021, p. 23). The changes currently taking place in this area are difficult for many seniors to understand. "Most seniors, raised in the spirit of tradition, are perceived in society as conservative, adhering predominantly to values other than those promoted in today's reality" (Brzezińska, 2021, p. 24). All this can lead to seniors functioning on the margins of social life with a feeling of misunderstanding for the changes taking place and the belief that the modern world does not understand them.

Old age in a definitional sense and the current demographic situation in Poland in the context of considerations about the challenges in social work with the elderly

In the *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego* [Universal dictionary of the Polish language] we find the definition of old age as "the period of life following maturity; the period when one is old; old age, advanced age" (Dubisz, 2003, p. 1379). The World Health Organisation divides this period of human life into three stages: early old age starting after the age of 60, intermediate old age falling between the ages of 74 and 89; and late old age, starting from the age of 90 and lasting until death (Colorincare, 2013). Each of these stages is different, but in each of them, changes can be seen that testify to the ageing of the human body. Old age is, therefore, a period in a person's life

in which they experience irreversible processes that make them aware of the passage of time and the fragility of human life.

The number of elderly people in Poland is increasing. Polish society is ageing and the proportion of senior citizens in the population is increasing every year. According to data from the *Główny Urząd Statystyczny* [Central Statistical Office], in 2022 the number of people aged 60 and over was 9.8 million. Since 2005, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of older people in the population in Poland. In 2005, this share was 17.2%, ten years later, in 2010, it was 19.6%, in 2020 it was 25.3%, and in 2022 it was 25.9% (GUS, 2023a).

The birth rate in Poland counterbalances this information. In 2022, 305,000 children were born. As the GUS points out, the number of births since 1998, excluding the period from 2008 to 2010 and 2017, has not reached 400,000 (GUS, 2023b). We therefore have a society in which the number of elderly people is increasing every year, while the number of children is steadily decreasing. This phenomenon has specific consequences for the functioning of society as a whole.

The demographic challenges facing Poland were the subject of discussion at the 3rd Demographic Congress, which took place in 2022. Currently, the number of people in the oldest age groups is increasing, while the overall population is decreasing. As emphasised by Józefina Hryniewicz (2023), “[...] the demographic challenge for Poland in the 21st century is a comprehensive, universally accepted by the Polish society, stable and long-term population policy [...]” (p. 163).

In this context, social work with the elderly and encouraging them to be open to the world and to be as independent as possible, depending on the individual’s life situation and state of health, is therefore a real challenge.

Technological development and the functioning of modern seniors

The 21st century is a time of intense development and constant change. It is also a time of technological progress, which certainly has a significant impact on the functioning of older people. According to research by the National Media Institute, people over 60 use the internet less often than people from younger generations. In the case of people aged between 60 and 74, this figure is 58%, while in the case of people over 75, 18% of them are internet users. The situation is different for younger people, for whom the internet is a medium used by the majority: 98% of people between the ages of 16 and 49 use the internet, and 85% of people between the ages of 50 and 59 use it (National Institute of Media, 2023).

Interesting insights into the media used daily by older people and the causes of digital exclusion among this section of society can also be found in the article

entitled *Wykluczenie cyfrowe seniorów w zakresie korzystania z usług społecznych w Polsce w dobie demograficznego starzenia się ludności* [Digital exclusion of seniors in the use of social services in Poland in the era of demographic ageing of the population] (Czarnecka, Kelm, & Koczur, 2023). The authors emphasised that the most popular medium for senior citizens is still the TV set, which 92.3% of people over 65 indicated as such. In contrast, 13.8% of them use a notebook or laptop on a daily basis (Czarnecka, Kelm, & Koczur, 2023).

The reason for the seniors' limited use of new media may be, among other things, their previous habits, but also difficulties in accessing them, health problems or the lack of adaptation of e-administration to enable seniors to use it daily. Many older people do not know how to use new technologies and have no one around them to teach them. It is also worth mentioning the necessary measures for the digital inclusion of senior citizens, as indicated by the authors of the article in question. These include access to infrastructure such as laptops, tablets and other devices with internet access, creating programmes aimed at the digital inclusion of senior citizens, preparing appropriate instructions and training on the use of digital devices, and addressing the health limitations that prevent older people from independently using social services with the support of new technologies (Czarnecka, Kelm, & Koczur, 2023).

The social status of today's senior citizens

The social status of the elderly has changed over the years. In the past, old age enjoyed a certain prestige. An old person, as Joanna K. Wawrzyniak (2017) notes, was something of an expert, and this position was associated with the experience and wisdom that come with age. "An old person played the role of a library, museum, teacher and expert" (Wawrzyniak, 2017, p. 42). As the author emphasises, although today's society still assigns similar roles to the elderly, it "[...] increasingly denies their existence, guided by the love of physical beauty, fitness, health, success and activity. The apotheosis of youth is doing its job: nobody wants to be old – even if they live to be 100 years old" (Wawrzyniak, 2017, p. 42).

Despite the changes that come with time, the needs of senior citizens remain the same, but their significance may be different from that of younger people (Czajka, 2023). Zdzisław Czajka emphasises the particular importance of the need for social belonging among the elderly and the associated need for recognition in the community. The consequences of not satisfying this need can include loneliness, a feeling of alienation and a feeling of being unnecessary, especially when one has no descendants (Czajka, 2023). The need for independence is also important, the fulfilment of which gives a sense of self-reliance and agency in life.

The development of civilisation, which has contributed to the prolongation of human life and an increase in its comfort, thanks to the development of medicine, among other things, can also be a factor influencing the social exclusion of senior citizens. The omnipresent development in all areas of human life means that, as J. K. Wawrzyniak (2017) emphasises, “[...] senior citizens are the group most easily and therefore most commonly overlooked and excluded from broadly understood social activities” (p. 43).

Zbigniew Woźniak (2016) presents an interesting reflection on the social face of ageing. In his opinion, the social age of older people reflects their social situation and requires an analysis of the roles they perform. The status of older people is determined by cultural, economic and psychosocial processes. The treatment of and perception of older people by society is evolving, but as the author emphasises, their social position is constantly declining, and today they are treated as “[...] a generation that is at the disposal of others, that is decided upon and moved around” (Woźniak, 2016, p. 93).

When considering the changing social position of the modern senior citizen, the role of intergenerational dialogue, which is necessary to maintain social ties, should be noted. Its aim is, as Jadwiga Kida notes, “[...] to strengthen social support networks through mutual understanding and trust” (2019, p. 63). It is worth mentioning this, especially since, despite the evolution of the family and the change in its perception in contemporary social reality, Poles invariably declare that it remains the highest value in their lives. This is indicated, among other things, by the CBOS report *System wartości Polaków w 2019 roku* [The value system of Poles in 2019], in which respondents list family happiness as the first item on the list of most important values. This result has remained unchanged for years and was indicated by 83% of respondents in the aforementioned report. The next three items on the list were: maintaining good health (for 69% of respondents), peace of mind (for 27% of respondents) and leading an honest life (mentioned by 19% of respondents) (CBOS, 2020).

Due to the contemporary social perception of old age as a stage that should be prevented at all costs, postponed or even denied, it is difficult to find one’s place in these circumstances. Z. Woźniak (2016) makes an interesting observation: “[...] old people looking back at the past have come to live in a future-oriented world, and the values associated with so-called late maturity have become values of little functionality in these circumstances” (p. 96).

The social roles assumed by contemporary senior citizens can be related to the groups and environments in which they function daily. Older people fulfil specific social roles in the family, for example, the role of spouse, grandmother, or grandfather. In the public sphere, senior citizens sometimes fulfil professional roles – this, of course, applies to those who remain professionally active despite their age. Seniors are also active in other environments, for example, in their social circles, in their local

communities, where they live as citizens, and as members of religious communities (Kramkowska, 2021).

Seniors fulfil a variety of social roles. Due to the changes resulting from their stage of life and the changes taking place in the modern world, they take on different roles than the ones they fulfilled when they were younger.

Health issues determining the daily functioning of the elderly

The various types of activities undertaken by senior citizens seem to be an essential element in determining their general quality of life, well-being and state of health. The activities undertaken by senior citizens fulfil various functions. It is worth mentioning, for example, the psychosocial function that improves the quality of life and sense of satisfaction (Rynkowska, 2016). The recreational and entertainment function is also important, as it eliminates the feeling of stress and helps to organise free time. The integrative function and the adaptive function should also be mentioned, as they make it easier for the elderly to adapt to the new family and social situation in which they find themselves (Rynkowska, 2016).

Among the characteristics of old age that are reflected in the daily functioning of older people and in the activities they undertake are, of course, progressive health problems related to the systematic damage to all organs, which results from the ageing of the body. The self-perception of health in senior citizens is important because, as Anna Leś and Ewa Kozdroń (2021) emphasise, it correlates with the degree of coping in difficult situations.

Health problems in older people include high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis, osteoporosis, dementia, rheumatism, Alzheimer's disease, depression and many others (interesting information on this subject is presented in the article *Choroby wieku starczego* [Diseases of old age...]). The increase in health problems with age causes a withdrawal from social life. However, this is determined by various factors, including genetics, the environment in which an elderly person lives daily, and the quality of life, not just its absolute length (Woźniak, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly had a major impact on the situation of Polish senior citizens. A research report *Jakość życia osób starszych w Polsce w pierwszym roku pandemii COVID-19* [Quality of life of the elderly in Poland in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic] (SeniorHub, 2021) conducted by the SeniorHub Institute for Senior Policy shows that the pandemic has significantly affected the quality of life of senior citizens in Poland. As many as 59.5% of respondents said that their condition is worse than before the pandemic. In addition, 62.8% of respondents over 60 years of age reduced their physical activity during this time, and in the case of people over

70 years of age, 73.9% of respondents gave this answer. Importantly, 60% of the surveyed seniors indicated limited access to healthcare during the pandemic. As a result of the research, recommendations were formulated for actions aimed at improving the quality of life of the elderly after the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations emphasise, among other things, the need to increase access to doctors, and better healthcare financing, extend public support for isolated people, and expand the network of activation, support and information services for senior citizens (SeniorHub, 2021).

Although the health effects of ageing cannot be avoided, and the health of senior citizens is the result of many factors and life experiences, it is worth encouraging older people to take part in sports and lead an active lifestyle. This affects functioning and improves cognitive performance, the decline of which can be observed with age (Sumińska, 2021). Physical activity not only affects health but also delays the ageing process. This, in turn, affects “mobility and extends the period of functional activity in everyday life” (Leś, Kozdroń, 2021, p. 7). Encouraging older people to do so is a task for society as a whole. The benefits of an active lifestyle should be a topic of conversation for social workers and anyone or any institution in contact with senior citizens. The fact that it is important to nurture this sphere at any age is communicated by numerous social campaigns available virtually everywhere. Physical activity is an ‘important component of independence’ in senior citizens’ lives (*Jak dbać o zdrowie seniora...* [How to take care of a senior’s health?], 2024) and can be undertaken individually or in a group, which also enables the establishment or maintenance of existing social relationships.

Financial difficulties among the elderly

The financial situation of the elderly in Poland has long been a topic of public, academic and everyday discourse. The difficult living and financial conditions of this part of society are emphasised. The amount of pension benefits to which senior citizens are entitled is, of course, determined by various factors, but in many cases it turns out to be insufficient to meet all current needs and to simply live with dignity.

Seniors, as Gertuda Uścińska (2024) points out, lead a frugal lifestyle, although it should be emphasised that they limit their needs at the same time. According to data from the Social Insurance Institution (in Polish: ZUS), 77.8% of benefit recipients in March 2023 received pensions, 15.1% received survivor’s pensions, and 7.2% received disability pensions (Czajkowski, 2023). The average gross pension in Poland in 2023 was 3,457 zlotys (Matłacz, 2024). At the same time, it should be emphasised that the benefits received by the elderly are the only source of income for many of them. This is evidenced, among other things, by the information contained

in the cyclical study of the Central Statistical Office entitled *Sytuacja osób starszych w Polsce* [Situation of the elderly in Poland] (GUS, 2023a), which, however, varies according to gender. The 2022 data presented in this document shows that as many as 91% of women between the ages of 60 and 89 were economically inactive. The percentage of economically inactive men in this age group was 71%. This is partly due to the different retirement ages for women and men, but the fact remains that the majority of senior citizens are economically inactive and therefore have no other sources of income from their work. The same study also provides information on senior citizens living in extreme poverty. In 2022, 3.8% of people aged 60 and over in Poland lived in households where expenditure was below the extreme poverty line (GUS, 2023a). According to a report by *Szlachetna Paczka* [Noble Box], there are currently around 300,000 senior citizens living in extreme poverty in Poland (*Raport o biedzie 2023*, 2023). The elderly and children are the two groups in society most at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

On the other hand, according to the Report of the Committee of Experts on Older People, *Sytuacja osób starszych w Polsce – wyzwania i rekomendacje* [The situation of older people in Poland – challenges and recommendations] (2020), issued by the Ombudsman for Children, older people receiving social assistance benefits report that the assistance is at a low level, which is particularly acute if the purchase of medicines is a regular expense. In response to this report, it is recommended that these benefits be increased, but also that social workers know the seniors in their area of activity, are familiar with their living and family situation, and update this information regularly, every six months. The same report also raised the issue of insufficient means of identifying the situation of older people who, due to insufficient benefits under the social security system, are at risk of living in poverty. This applies, among others, to people living alone, in rural areas or with a low level of education. The role of the social welfare system and its cooperation with other organisations should be strengthened. The extent and methods of support for the most vulnerable should be determined individually on the basis of prior arrangements regarding their broadly defined life situation (*Sytuacja osób starszych w Polsce...*, 2020).

Conclusion

Determining the challenges in social work with the elderly requires an analysis of the following research problems, which I have highlighted in this paper, concerning:

- the demographic situation in Poland;
- civilisational and cultural development and the resulting consequences for the functioning of senior citizens;

- the social position of contemporary senior citizens;
- health issues and quality of life;
- material issues and problems in this sphere, so often experienced by the elderly.

To support the elderly, it is necessary to recognise and understand their situation and the processes that influence the change in their social position. It is also important to remember the ageing of Polish society and the consequences that this brings. Old age, apart from the health effects caused by biological changes taking place in the human body, also affects the social, economic and demographic dimensions, which is characteristic, among other things, of Polish society.

The planning of specific actions should be preceded by a proper diagnosis made by social workers and other implementers of social work objectives. This diagnosis, covering the situation of a given person, should take into account, in particular, their family, health and financial situation, as well as the possibilities of support and social networks in which the senior citizen functions and which can reveal possible sources of help, but also risks. Such a diagnosis can be made in cooperation with the local environment, which is understood in a broad sense: it is made up of institutions, organisations, individuals and social groups within which a person functions on a daily basis. Its location is visible primarily in the local dimension. Therefore, an understanding of the senior's local environment is necessary to plan specific assistance for them.

Social work with the elderly is therefore about providing support, raising awareness and motivating. It challenges stereotypes about old age, which is often perceived as a difficult and sad time. Joanna Chylińska (2015) states that “[...] old age is often perceived as a time when a person has no strength, their health declines and therefore they should rest first and foremost. [...] an elderly person is sick, infirm and mentally slow” (p. 64). This stage is associated not only with illness and declining health but also with acute loneliness, anxiety and fear. It is also perceived as a period in which a person depends on others, cannot decide for themselves, feels enslaved, and does not want to be enslaved. Some of these stereotypes reflect the lives of older people. The factors causing the gradual dependence of senior citizens on their carers can be divided into two groups: health-related, including chronic diseases, disabilities or old age, and social, resulting from living alone, poverty, childlessness, loss of a loved one, neglect, and unforeseeable events (Sygulska, 2016). However, this does not mean that older people, even those dependent on others, cannot live with dignity and a sense of self-worth.

The first stage of support should be social security. According to Abraham Maslow's theory, an individual's physiological needs should be met first, followed by the needs related to a sense of security, respect and self-fulfilment (Miler-Zawodniak, 2012). Meeting basic needs is therefore the first step in helping senior citizens. The next step is to motivate them, encourage them to be active and make them feel that they

are important, needed and not alone, even when their health is poor. This kind of support requires accompanying senior citizens through this difficult stage of life. Old age, the problems, difficulties and dilemmas associated with it, both for the elderly themselves and for those closest to them, are inevitable. Many older people try to meet the challenges of old age head-on. How they live depends to some extent on them. "A person works on the meaning and quality of their old age throughout their entire life" (Małyska, 2017, p. 44). Social work activities focus primarily on those seniors who are unable to face difficulties on their own or are not motivated enough to do so.

These challenges, which are taken on by people who are conscious, responsible and focused on supporting the elderly, are not difficult. On the contrary, social work for this group brings measurable results and has a real impact on improving the length and quality of a particular senior citizen's life.

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