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# Adapting to Old Age as a Competency of the Future in the Context of the Phenomenon of an Ageing Society

Adaptacja do starości jako kompetencja przyszłości w perspektywie zjawiska starzenia się społeczeństwa

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#### **Abstract**

Aim. The pace of life, instant culture, sense of immediacy, cult of youth, employment instability, and technological advances determine our lifestyles, the internalisation of specific values, and social norms, creating a need for constant presence in holistically understood media (especially online). A world operating so dynamically often marginalises older people who demonstrate less skill in using modern devices. Trying to meet society's demands, we strive to maintain our youth and attractive appearance for as long as possible, while simultaneously defining old age as a negative period of stagnation. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare each person for their own old age, sharing knowledge about the ageing process, its changes, and the need to modify social roles, so that each individual, upon reaching the "autumn of life," can continue the process of self-fulfilment, the development of interests, and actively participate in social life. The phenomenon of an ageing society presents a challenge: providing each individual with optimal con-

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ditions for multifaceted development, active engagement, and participation in social life, while simultaneously utilising their individual potential and abilities for the benefit of the whole society. **Methods and Materials.** The following paper was prepared based on a subject literature review, covering various scientific disciplines, particularly the social sciences. The literature focused on older adults, their activation, adaptation to the existence final stage, successful ageing, and opportunities related to old age.

**Results and Conclusion.** The analysis concludes that appropriate adaptation to old age is a crucial future competency, given the ongoing phenomenon of ageing population.

*Keywords*: old age, competences of the future, adaptation to the old age, the phenomenon of aging society, resources of the old age period

#### Abstrakt

Cel. Tempo życia, kultura typu instant, poczucie natychmiastowości, kult młodości, niestabilność zatrudnienia, postęp w zakresie technologii determinują nasz styl życia, internalizację określonych wartości, normy społeczne a także kreują potrzebę ciągłej obecności w holistycznie rozumianych mediach (szczególnie internetowych). Świat funkcjonujący w sposób tak dynamiczny, często marginalizuje osoby starsze, które wykazują mniejsze umiejętności obsługi nowoczesnych urządzeń. Starając się sprostać wymaganiom stawianym przez społeczeństwo pragniemy jak najdłużej zachować młodość, atrakcyjny wygląd jednocześnie definiując starość jako nacechowany pejoratywnie okres stagnacji. Zatem niezwykle istotne staje się przygotowanie każdego człowieka do własnej starości, przekazywanie wiedzy o procesach starzenia się, występujących zmianach, konieczności modyfikacji pełnionych ról społecznych, tak aby każda jednostka mogła, przekraczając próg "jesieni życia", kontynuować proces samorealizacji, rozwoju zainteresowań, jednocześnie aktywnie uczestniczyć w życiu społecznym. Zjawisko starzenia się społeczeństwa stanowi wyzwanie, aby każdej jednostce zapewnić optymalne warunki do wielopłaszczyznowego rozwoju, podejmowania aktywności, partycypacji w życiu społecznym, jednocześnie wykorzystując jej indywidualny potencjał i możliwości dla dobra ogółu społeczeństwa.

**Metody i materiały.** Na potrzeby przygotowania niniejszej pracy podjęto analizę literatury przedmiotu w obszarze różnych dyscyplin naukowych, a w szczególności obejmującą literaturę z zakresu nauk społecznych. Literatura bazowała na tematyce osób starszych, ich aktywizacji, adaptacji do ostatniego etapu egzystencji, pomyślnego przebiegu procesu starzenia się, możliwości związanych z okresem "jesieni życia".

**Wyniki i wnioski.** Rezultat podjętej analizy stanowi konkluzja, iż odpowiednia adaptacja do okresu starości stanowi istotną kompetencję przyszłości w perspektywie postępującego zjawiska starzenia się społeczeństwa.

*Słowa kluczowe*: starość, zjawisko starzenia się społeczeństwa, adaptacja do starości, kompetencja przyszłości, zasoby okresu starości

### Introduction

Socioeconomic and cultural transformations imply, among other things, holistic social changes. Progress in medicine and many fields of science, also determines the functioning of individuals. Furthermore, the lifestyle, functioning, needs, and problems of individuals and societies are also undergoing transformation. As human lifespans lengthen and the number of older adults grows, it becomes increasingly important to prepare each individual for this period of life, ensuring it is a time of self-fulfilment, activity, and participation in social life.

A discussion of adaptation to old age should begin with an analysis of the concept of adaptation. According to Krzysztof Olechnicki and Paweł Załęcki, adaptation is the process of individuals or social groups continually adjusting to changing environmental conditions in order to ensure that fundamental life needs are met (Olechnicki & Załęcki, 2004). Therefore, in order to meet their needs, individuals focus their actions and alter their behaviour to the conditions of the constantly changing social environment. This process requires careful observation of the environment, recognition of social norms, and the ability to internalise views, beliefs, and values. Each individual's existence consists of various stages resulting from a specific stage of development, associated with fulfilling specific social roles. According to Norbert Pikuła, the media, i.e., the press, radio, television, and the internet, undoubtedly plays a decisive role in shaping cultural perceptions of old age (Pikuła, 2016). The current image of old age, the image of senior citizens, is determined by many factors. The perception of the oldest generation determines attitudes toward them, quality of life, the ability to meet psychological needs—that is, the social dimension of health—as well as the customs and traditions of old age that prevail in a given socio-cultural context (Pikuła, 2016). Due to current cultural trends, old age is still perceived negatively. Negative emotions can also be evoked by elements of reality that are unfamiliar to us. Preparation for this stage plays a crucial role in positively experiencing the final period of our lives – old age.

Another important concept for the analyses undertaken is adaptation to old age. Citing Adam A. Zych, adaptation to old age is a multifaceted process of human adaptation to the process of ageing and old age (Zych, 2007). The process of adapting to the *autumn of life* period requires special attention from both the individual entering it and society as a whole. This is a special period characterised by significant changes in the fulfilment of social roles. Old age determines the cessation of professional activity, which can lead to difficulties in organising emerging free time and in finding new activities that will provide a source of satisfaction. Participation in social life and the actions undertaken by the individual favour the process of meeting one's needs understood holistically, simultaneously determining a high quality of life for the elderly.

Successful social adaptation in the face of dynamic changes, including those in the field of technological development, requires an individual to possess appropriate competencies. According to Astrid Meczkowska, the concept of competency correlates with the potential demonstrated by an individual, which determines their predispositions to perform specific types of tasks (Pilch, 2003). This means that it is necessary to possess specific traits, abilities, skills, and the willingness to take specific actions to develop appropriate competencies. Adaptation to old age should be viewed as a fundamental ability in the context of an ageing society. Acquiring knowledge about the ageing process, time management skills, and the ability to engage in activities during the autumn of life play a significant role in shaping a positive image of this period of existence as a stage of further self-fulfilment, participation in social life, and the perception of increased free time as an opportunity to develop passions and interests. Older adults often possess resources that are underestimated by society, which they can utilise through active participation in social life. Representatives of the oldest generation have free time and can engage in volunteer work, benefiting other members of society. Furthermore, they possess life experience, wisdom, and knowledge that they can pass on to younger generations. Therefore, successful adaptation to old age enables the effective use of seniors' resources, ensuring their high quality of life and the common good.

## The Phenomenon of the Ageing of Society and its Consequences

The previously mentioned socio-economic changes, advances in medicine and other scientific fields, as well as widespread access to healthcare have contributed to the increase in average life expectancy. At the same time, social awareness and knowledge about birth control are increasing, as are the opportunities for planned parenthood. Nowadays, parenting roles (especially for women) are not the only ones performed by working-age individuals. Professional work has become a crucial platform for individual self-fulfilment. Family models are also undergoing transformation, with multigenerational groups being replaced by nuclear families. A number of factors occurring over recent decades have contributed to the phenomenon of population ageing. This process is defined by the increasing share of older people in the total population, coupled with a concurrent decline in the birth rate.

According to the Office of the European Union, the average life expectancy of a European citizen has increased significantly over the last five decades (Office of the European Union, 2023). Simultaneously, the birth rate is declining. Forecasts predict a decline in the European Union's population despite high immigration rates. The phenomenon of population ageing is a long-term trend that began decades earlier. It is noticeable in the growing share of senior citizens, accompanied by a parallel

decline in the share of working-age individuals in the general population. According to data as of January 1, 2021, people aged 65 and over constituted 20.8% of the total population of the European Union. Projections for 2050 state that approximately 30% of the European Union's population will be over 65, and that there will be fewer than two working-age individuals for every senior citizen, meaning the projected old-age dependency ratio will be 56.7% (Office of the European Union, 2023). This data demonstrates that the ageing process in the European Union and its individual countries is progressing. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct intensive research and plan comprehensive solutions for society as a whole, adapting conditions to the needs of its citizens. Furthermore, the ability to harness the potential of older people for the benefit of all and individuals is gaining new importance, ensuring that seniors can fulfil their needs, interests, engage in activities, and participate in society.

Given demographic projections, the group of people over 65 should be considered social capital. Statistical data for Poland is similar to that for the entire European Union. According to Statistics Poland, Poland's population on December 31, 2022, amounted to 37.8 million (GUS, 2023). Forecasts for 2060, according to the main scenario, assume a decline to 30.4 million. Furthermore, none of the demographic forecast scenarios predict a fertility rate high enough to ensure generational replacement. Such a rate was last recorded in Poland in 1988, when it was 2.1. However, all scenarios predict that the number of Poland's oldest citizens, those aged 65 and older, will increase compared to 2022, reaching nearly 30% of the total population by 2060 (GUS – Statistics Poland, 2023). This means that Polish society is also undergoing demographic changes known as aging population. The task of public bodies and society as a whole is therefore to prepare the space to meet the needs of the oldest generation and to utilise its inherent potential.

Equally important is the preparation of individuals for old age, both individually and collectively, understood as a social phenomenon. This process provides the foundation for the proper functioning of society as a whole, changing the perception of senior citizens not as a burden, but as a resource that can be used to improve the quality of life of individual citizens.

## Adaptating to Old Age

Nowadays, in the context of an ageing society, adapting to old age is becoming a key competency for individuals and society as a whole. According to Renata Konieczna-Woźniak, adapting to old age, which enables individual well-being, is a complex phenomenon (Konieczna-Woźniak, 2012). Consumer society and the prevalence of popular culture shape attitudes that prioritise youth (Konieczna-Woźniak, 2012). The shape of con-

temporary culture thus determines internalised values and the pervasive image of older people in society, which does not support successful adaptation to old age. Therefore, it is crucial to introduce new patterns of behaviour towards older people into the sociocultural reality, presenting a positive image of senior citizens and the autumn of life period as a natural stage of life that allows for the fulfilment of holistically understood needs and a high quality of life.

Gerontological education can be helpful in achieving these goals. According to Zofia Szarota, gerontological education consists of four elements (Szarota, 2014). The first is education to experience old age, understood as preparation for one's own autumn of life, the next is education at old age – these are activities addressed to representatives of the oldest generation, *e.g.*, based on the learning process, the idea of lifelong learning. The third component is education through old age, which establishes a platform for intergenerational communication based, among other things, on the transmission of values. The final component is education for old age, which provides the foundation for professional preparation of staff to work with the elderly (Szarota, 2014). Ageing, based on a holistic understanding of activity, requires the preparation of the whole society, representatives of all generations, not just senior citizens (Szarota, 2014). Education, considered as a multifaceted process encompassing the entire society, individual generations at different stages of their lives, facilitates the process of adapting to old age for every citizen.

Given the current reality, holistically planned actions are essential to introduce longlasting changes in citizens' awareness, modify established patterns of behaviour and social norms, and shift the hierarchy of values. The prospects of demographic change require immediate action to prevent social problems and ensure the well-being of the oldest citizens while simultaneously utilising their inherent potential for the benefit of society as a whole. According to Anna Leszczyńska-Rejchert, the phenomenon of an ageing population implies the need to expand the scope and diversity of gerontological education models for society as a whole (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2022). This type of education is a fundamental element of preparation for the final phase of life, both individually, for one's own old age, and for society as a whole, which means achieving it by representatives of various groups, such as family members. These interactions are intended to contribute to appropriate adaptation to the autumn of life period by current senior citizens as well as those who will be at this stage of existence in the future (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2022). Therefore, in the context of an ageing population, appropriate gerontological education should be ensured so that individuals can acquire competencies in preparing for their own old age while simultaneously respecting other members of society. According to Joanna K. Wawrzyniak, adaptation to old age is characterised by an individual course and a multifactorial nature. This process is determined by individual characteristics, such as temperament, life experiences, health status, level of education, perspectives on activity, ability to fulfil roles, the social environment, expectations and demands from others, stereotypes about senior citizens, level of satisfaction, and attitudes toward others (Wawrzyniak, 2019). It is crucial to consider all factors that determine the course of the adaptation process when planning gerontological education activities to achieve the most satisfactory results.

Analysis of the issue of adaptation to old age also attempts to define old age. According to Simone de Beauvoir, old age should be considered holistically, taking into account all its elements, as it is a matter of the entire culture, not just biology (de Beauvoir, 2011). This concept emphasises its multifaceted nature and the significant role of culture in shaping it. Following Artur Fabiś, the connotations of old age in Polish culture are usually negative (Fabiś, 2017). He also emphasises the fact that we choose terms for the oldest generation with extreme caution, for example, using the term *senior* or autumn of life, while simultaneously neglecting the comfort of young people by defining them simply as *young* (Fabiś, 2017). This attempt at definition also focuses on the enormous role that is played by culture in the society's perception of old age.

Furthermore, Stanisława Steuden says that old age is multifaceted, a combination of physiological, social, and psychological factors, as well as the culmination of a longterm developmental process (Steuden, 2020). Ageing can be considered as a process of change in the biological, social, and psychological dimensions, as well as a period of existence with specific psychological, social, and cultural characteristics (Steuden, 2020). These definitions present old age holistically, as a whole composed of individual aspects of human existence (physiology, psychology, culture, and social context). Its individual dimensions constitute a connection that, as a result of changes in one factor, can lead to changes in another area. The perceived quality of life is crucial at every stage of a person's life; maintained at a high level, it enables the process of self-fulfilment and the realisation of one's potential. According to Helena Hrapkiewicz, the quality of life in old age is determined both by the conditions created by society and the individual's personal attitude (Hrapkiewicz, 2009). Therefore, the above-mentioned gerontological education, conducted appropriately, can provide the foundation for successful adaptation to old age, while simultaneously experiencing a high quality of life at this stage of existence. According to Anna Pitala, acquiring knowledge about the ageing process and its consequences, and understanding it, helps in developing an empathetic perspective towards senior citizens (Pitala, 2019).

Proper interpersonal relationships can be a determinant of understanding issues related to old age. Interpersonal contacts foster the fulfilment of important psychological needs, such as acceptance, belonging, and security. However, acceptance of the dignity of the oldest generation also holds a special place. Dignity is a fundamental value that every human being possesses at birth (Pitala, 2019). It is therefore important to cultivate an attitude of respect and acceptance towards others and their limitations, so that each individual can fully utilise their potential for the benefit of a society as a whole. According to Alexandra Withnall, the ageing process contributes to health problems and cer-

tain limitations, but it also guarantees certain freedoms, such as acquiring new knowledge (Withnall, 2023). It is essential to create a platform for intergenerational communication so that representatives of younger generations can understand the ageing process, gain perspective on how they can function in later life, and ensure that their old age is a source of satisfaction (Withnall, 2023).

Quoting Agnieszka Nowicka, old age is undoubtedly associated with peace, independence, and free time, which can be used according to personal preferences and interests (Nowicka, 2010). Activities undertaken during this phase of life typically correlate with preferences manifested in previous stages of existence, as well as the lifestyle and current needs of an individual (Nowicka, 2010). Therefore, the final stage of life is a continuation of previous activities, a person's activity in relation to their current situation. The foundation of old age as a phase of life are the resources of free time, which can be used both to care for the perceived quality of life and personal development, as well as through community activities, participation in social life, and volunteering. Older people possess life experience and knowledge that they can transfer to younger generations. Therefore, in the context of an ageing society, it is crucial to perceive old age as a potential that can, and even should, be utilised to promote the development of both the individual and a society as a whole. Older people constitute social capital, so successful adaptation to this stage of existence can help in utilising the resources of this social group.

Acquiring knowledge about the ageing process, limitations, and health issues, and above all, the opportunities that come with reaching a certain age, is crucial in developing competencies for successful adaptation to old age. It is important to emphasise that old age is also a time of modifying social roles and ceasing professional activity, which determines the majority of our adult lives. Therefore, at this stage of existence, free time resources emerge that can be used for engaging in activities, participating in social life, self-fulfilment, meeting needs, realising plans and dreams, and taking action for others to compensate for existing social roles and maintain social status while leveraging the potential of the oldest generation. Given the phenomenon of the ageing of the society and the forecast that 30% of the population will be older adults, gerontological education is essential to effectively utilise the social capital of this group. Society is a collection of individuals, and therefore, the quality of life of each individual and the way they utilise their resources determines the functioning of the entire community.

# **Summary**

Adapting to old age, in the perspective of the increasing duration of human existence and demographic forecasts regarding the increased share of older people in the general population, is a key element for the proper functioning of a society. According

to Agnieszka Majewska-Kafarowska, older people currently constitute an important social group, both due to their growing numbers and the specific needs determined by the specific social situation of senior citizens (Majewska-Kafarowska, 2009). Currently, the issue of quality of life of people at old age and the ability to meet these needs has evolved into a social, and even national, dilemma (Majewska-Kafarowska, 2009).

As a society, we are obligated to provide older people with optimal conditions for further development, activity, and participation in social life, so that their perceived quality of life is defined in positive terms. According to Konieczna-Woźniak (2019), promoting activity during the autumn of life is a fundamental factor in learning this stage of existence. The negative image of senior citizens present in Polish society stems from, among other things, the fact that, until recently, older people had few opportunities to participate in social life. Retirement and ceasing professional activity meant a period of caring for grandchildren or loneliness in one's own household. Cultural trends, consumerist lifestyles, and popular culture are factors hindering the development of an accurate and truthful image of old age in society. With the development of many scientific fields, including gerontology, issues of activation of older adults and their quality of life have emerged in the social debate. Demographic changes have additionally determined the implementation of comprehensive measures for older adults. Institutions offering various forms of activation for the oldest generation have begun operating. Currently, senior citizens can participate in activities at Universities of the Third Age, which allow them to expand their knowledge, acquire new skills, and develop their interests. Seniors' clubs and interest groups targeted at this social group are also emerging. The range of activities offered is constantly expanding to meet the needs of seniors. Older adults have gained new opportunities to participate in social life even after retiring from work; meanwhile, the representatives of younger generations have the opportunity to observe the oldest generations as active individuals who utilise their potential. Therefore, this provides a space for shaping an adequate image of old age as a natural stage of our existence, a period of self-fulfilment and participation in social life, while simultaneously contributing to the adaptation of younger generations to old age.

According to Wawrzyniak, the attitude towards one's own old age is the result of many factors, both psychological and physiological, such as temperament, personality, life experiences, as well as health and the general condition of the body (Wawrzyniak, 2019). A particularly crucial factor shaping the approach to ageing is the degree to which spiritual and psychological needs, such as personal development, feeling needed, and fulfilling personal plans, are met (Wawrzyniak, 2019). Therefore, to achieve the best possible results in gerontological education, it is essential to undertake multifaceted activities encompassing various areas of social life and representatives of different generations. An important, often underestimated, communication platform

is intergenerational communication. Creating a platform for communication between representatives of different generations can be an effective way to transmit values, share knowledge about the ageing process, and shape an optimistic view on the final period of existence, as a period full of new opportunities. Old age is the next stage of our existence, therefore, the main task of gerontological education is to develop competencies to adapt to old age in individuals, to utilise the social capital of this social group, while simultaneously promoting the development of a society as a whole, minimising the likelihood of social problems.

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