

Psychological image of seniors in Poland¹

The objective of this study is to present a psychological image of Polish seniors. It highlights their mental needs and character, interests and education, relationships between them, lifestyle and the social dimension of the seniors. For this study we have reviewed online articles, chapters in books and reports, which have appeared in the last two decades.

Mental needs and character of senior

In comparison to other European countries, Polish seniors live less actively as the study and experience of everyday life show (Matusiak 2011). Although, more often you will meet those who pursue their dreams and eagerly indulge in their passions. Stipulation of progress is satisfy the needs of safety, love and membership. In many opinions senior seems to be someone who is desirable for the other people and this is connected with fulfilling carrying function and educational role in the family. The feeling of being needed can be seen also on the wide field associated with the transmission of traditions, values, others can benefit from the rich experience of seniors and their skills (Landsberg 2012). Although in post-productive stage of life, man has stronger need of closeness than previously (Susułowska 1989), now expect usefulness and respect from them. Meet of those needs determine creative attitude self-addressed, and to others.

Reports show, that Polish seniors describes low level of activity, and at the same time high level of alienation (Matusiak 2011). From the research there emerges a male senior picture as a man who wants peace, avoids stress and focuses on the interests of accompanying him all the time. Picture of female senior is more optimistic and active than the man described previously (Bonk 2011). In general, seniors are often accompanied by lack of trust the others, resulting in loneliness perceived as a destructive phenomenon (Bonk 2011). This lack of confidence is connected with low self-esteem and low value sense (Boni 2008). However, decisive factor of senior satisfaction is age, where together with its growing, there are more seniors who negatively assess the quality of their social relationships. What is interesting, the group of 80+ is the most satisfied with the social activities, which counteract the solitude² and promote the mental health.

Interests and education

Observations reveals, that amount of seniors using information technology is still not satisfactory. However, seniors in many various ways access the services offered by media, but despite this – they do not use them. Those, who use those means, have got better frame of mind and more optimism. According to Polish specialists reports only 10 % of Polish seniors use Internet – this result is the lowest in European Union.

In terms of pre-figurative culture, young people play the role of teachers' guides for the elderly. For example, we can see which sources the seniors mainly use, when they looking for the knowledge about some technological achievements. Often grandchildren show them how to operate the technical novelties (Landsberg 2012). Seniors seem to be interested in education, and thanks to University of Third Age like lectures, computer classes, psychological workshops, they can realize themselves. Some studies on elderly show, that thanks to such a kind of mental elicitation, seniors can develop and fulfil themselves (Łój 2001) and do not remain the slaves of their age or imaginary limitations (Boni 2008). Through those forms they realize their hobbies not only individually, but also in a group, associations or clubs (Landsberg 2012).

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²The diagnosis of the elderly, obtained from http://www.pokl-repslodz.pl/sites/default/files/diagnoza_50%2B_raport_ko%C5%84_cowy_final.pdf (12.2011)

Realization of interests and education results in avoiding of smoking (80 %), searching medical information and cause of disease and health (77 %). Enjoyment of friends and regulated family life (77 %), following the medical recommendations (77 %), diet (73 %) are perceived as a preventive health behaviors, leading to a positive mental attitude. However, the most common complaint mentioned by Polish seniors is trouble with sleeping (47 %).

Self-relation and lifestyle

Contemporary lifestyle is still changing. This also applies to Polish seniors way of life. Picture emerging from the qualitative research shows that more and more older people are well maintained, open and curious of the world (83.3 %). They are full of hope, have a sense of meaning in life. The vast majority of respondents (88 %) believe that they should not give up and improve their quality of life. But among the seniors, there are more pessimists than optimists (Wadołowska 2009).

Senior's condition reveals through the sexual efficiency and time organization. Report results on sexuality show that Polish seniors are interested in this area of life, but they not always can enjoy it because of health problems. They have low level of knowledge about possible help and specific pharmacological agents³. Next important aspect is organization of senior lifetime. The form of spending it in retirement is work for social organizations, local government or political. However the research shows that such activities do not seem to succeed in the elderly, particularly those who do not work for hire or reward. Of these, only 4 % said they have belonged to some organization, and 6 % -membership and activity in it. Although the vast majority of the Polish people of retirement age withdraw from the labour market, it does not mean for them to withdraw from life in general. Seniors keep contacts with the family outside their household, and also with friends, with whom they can talk about personal cases and ask for help. In 2007, 45 % of responders declared that several times per week they meet the family, and one third (34 %) do it once or few times a month. One fifth of responders (18 %) meet the family few times a year, and 3 % occasionally (Wadołowska 2009). As can be seen, motivation for seniors' activities is desire of having the organized time⁴. Therefore it is important to offer proper guidance for seniors, respecting their motivation and expectations.

Senior social image

Senior social commitment is two to three times lower than in European countries and is usually limited to the immediate family (Boni 2008). Comparing to their peers in Europe, Polish seniors quite often declare dedicating their time to family, but this is applied only to 30 % of respondents⁵. There are no empirical studies on the role of grandparents in the family, at national and regional level, which causes that the most effective kind of support from them cannot be determined (Schneider at al 2012). Although, they are regular partners of resting grandchildren, often more than parents (Parnicka 2008), play a significant role in the socialization of offspring, thereby satisfying emotional (Tyszkowa 1990) and financial needs (Wadołowska 2012). Research shows that women (84 %) feel more needed in the family than men (60 % fill unnecessary 5 % is considered). However, acceptance in the immediate vicinity is experienced by 60 % of seniors and there were no significant differences between men and women.

Commitment in helping to others make them satisfied and well-being. Research reveals that the highest level of satisfaction is connected with quality of relationship with friends (62 %), relationship in family (43 %), achievements (43 %), financial situation of own family (43 %).

³ Report image of older people in the media, were obtained from http://www.bezuprzedzen.org/doc/Wizerunek_Osob_Starszych_w_Mediach.pdf (08.2007)

⁴ Government Program for Senior Citizens Social Activity for 2012-2013, obtained from: http://as.sektor3.wroclaw.pl/page/raporty/projekt_program%20na%20rzecz%20aktywnosci%20osob%20starszych.pdf (07.2012)

⁵ AXA Retirement Scope (2008) -United States.

Health (27 %) and prospects for the future (17 %) are cited as the factors bringing moderate satisfaction. Lowest level of satisfaction is connected with situation in the country (3 %). High satisfaction with relationships with friends shows that contemporary Polish senior is often more social supported and has much better relationship with them than with the immediate family (Bonk 2011).

The image of Polish senior is not so unequivocal. They is accompanied by a sense of isolation and marginalization, the general aversion to social activity, which results from the attitudes in the earlier stages of life and life experiences, and extensive involvement in family life and the care of their grandchildren⁶. It may be noticed that this image is based on dissonances and contradictions. On the one hand, we have seniors who feel necessary, share their life experience, traditions, values, they are open to the younger generation, inoculate the culture. On the other hand we see them pushed to the margins, unnecessary, embittered and lonely people, who nobody wants to hear, causing further frustration and sense of apathy or hopelessness (Landsberg 2012). In fact, those two images coexist and no one of them is able to deny each other.

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⁶ Government Program for Senior Citizens Social Activity for 2012-2013, obtained from: http://as.sektor3.wroclaw.pl/page/raporty/projekt_program%20na%20rzecz%20aktywnosci%20osob%20starszych.pdf (07.2012)

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