

## AUTOCREATIONAL ASPECT OF AGEING IN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** The paper treats about the issue of ageing meant as a purposefully initiated process of autocreational spiritual and moral development of a senior. Correlation of ageing and personal autocreation leads to conviction that treating this process as an art of living directing a person towards creative inner change is fully justified. The process occurs on the basis of aware and intentional acting towards projection of strategies that lead to personal fulfillment identified with finding the meaning of one's own existence. The problem of autocreational aspect of ageing was presented in the context of social and cultural conditions determining the phenomena unfavorable to present elders - deepening the intergenerational gap, weakening their social status and real possibilities to participate in public life. On the ground of European Parliament Resolution the main points of strategy that creates conditions enabling educational, professional and social activation of seniors and restores their balanced position towards younger generations in social life's practice were presented.

**Key words:** ageing, the art of getting old, creative development, autocreation, intentionality, meaning and quality of life, inter-generational distance, social and educational policy.

### Ageing as a result and determinant of new values in social life

The analysis of the statistic data regarding the structure of population, changes within the scope of the demographic indicators observed in the last decade as well as prognosis for further demographic changes of the studied population reveal an ongoing tendency of the Polish society to age. In the macro-social approach this process corresponds with the observed demographic changes that occur in the European societies and with the long-term demographic projections. The characteristic feature of the ageing of population is the interference of occurrences typical for this process and continuing extension of life expectancy, increasing death rate in the oldest age groups and increasing negative population growth rate. These phenomena lead - during four decades starting from the early 90's of the XX century till prognosed by the Central Statistic Office year 2035 – to lasting changes in the structure of Polish society, the effects of which are already noticeable (GUS, 2009).

The process of population's ageing is complex because, as it has been already mentioned, it is connected with various factors impacting the changes in the structural, functional and existential aspects. The estimated tendency to extend the average lifespan and decreasing population growth indicator lead to disproportion between the younger age groups and seniors in the scale of the whole Polish society. This change is generally accompanied by the decrease of the age groups of 0-24 and 25-64 for the benefit of the oldest age groups of "65+" (Biuletyn 2000, p. 22-21). The rate and the direction of those changes weaken vitality and condition of the whole population in the macro-social scale, reduce its number and reproducibility dynamics. They also generate unfavorable occurrences in the social and economic spheres due to growing social, care and insurance obligations towards the oldest age groups, the responsibilities that are carried by the younger generations of Poles. However, apart from the social dimension of the phenomena generated by the economic factors, it is worth noticing that ageing of the population causes various effects of psychosocial character which have strong anthropological and cultural ground.

This process, due to its scale, gives ageing of an individual a new quality in the social aspect. Seniors, as a largely represented social group, get social meaning in the public, service and economic spheres. Ridding of the stigmas of not much numerous, scattered and passive age group, they will become the object of interest among politicians soliciting votes during elections and referendums, entrepreneurs providing not only medical but also educational, cultural<sup>1</sup> and touristic<sup>2</sup> services, managers shaping the profiles of retail banks or big shopping centers to meet the needs and consumeric demands of seniors<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Very popular initiatives of launching the universities of the third age and numerous training-workshop forums, stimulating the cognitive processes of the elderly and equipping them with new competencies as well as growing number of artistic and cultural offers from philharmonics, theatres or museums addressed to seniors are a proof of those tendencies.

<sup>2</sup> The European Union has already undertaken first, spectacular actions in the tourist services sector addressed to this age group. Seniors can spend co-financed holiday in practically all Spanish resorts.

<sup>3</sup> There is a growing number of promotion campaigns of products from medical and food sectors addressed to seniors. The most classic example is the Vission Express campaign, a company that offers the discounts that "grow with age" for their ophthalmic products. For years

The process gives ageing a new quality also in the aspect of personal growth of seniors who, encouraged today to remain active in different areas of social reality and to develop their personal intellectual and acting potential, will still – despite old age – be the authors of their personal development. An important question occurs in this context: in which areas of seniors' activity the strategies stimulating their autocreational maturing to dignified and joyful experiencing “the autumn of life” should be introduced?; and what factors (conditions) within the social policy would have the decisive meaning for readiness of seniors to apply those autocreational strategies?

### **The value of ageing in the context of multistage process of personal autocreation**

The creative life attitudes of a modern man fit into the idea of searching person, aware of one's own creative activity, making conscious decisions in the sense of responsibility for one's own fate. Searching is focused on discovering and understanding the meanings revealing themselves in relation of a person with the outer world as well as directed inside – to their world of meanings. It means “permanent, ongoing change, making difficult choices, discerning, doubting in one's own judgments, searching for new justifications” located “in the possible world” (A. Cudowska, 2004, p.128). The idea of a searching man highlights the creative context of life attitudes, which reveals itself in curiosity, concentration, involvement, experiencing of “me”, accepting conflicts and opposites, faith in reality of one's own experience (Ibidem, p. 128-129). Only a searching man is oriented towards the “intentional creativity” based on self-determination aimed at enriching oneself and creating an individual life style.

Life attitude of an individual is formed on the basis of their relation to the existential values and presents relatively stable “set of opinions and convictions about their needs, ambitions and life goals in the area of the most cherished values (...) It is, thus, the function of many factors: life experiences, the spectrum and type of possessed knowledge, motivations, skills, type of personality of the individual, their cognitive style, evaluative and judging attitudes or, at least, environmental factors” (Ibidem, p. 129).

The existential aspect of autocreation is based on life attitude which consists of social attitudes characteristic for a person who is “open, free and responsible, intentionally directed, able to create their own «philosophy of life», realizing themselves through fulfilling the values” (M. Straś-Romanowska, 1992, s. 105). Intentionality becomes the key category in this case. It binds finding the meaning (meanings) in life through discovering, exploring and experiencing the values with the strive to fulfill the meaning in life choices made and actions taken by an individual (V.E. Frankl, 2010, pp. 49-53 and others). Considering the observation that, in the anthropologic approach, the category of intentionality involves relation: experience (meaning) – goal (action), according to Maria Straś-Romanowska's remark – it should be considered as a holistic process that remains in close relation with the system of personal meanings, dynamics of which takes the form of the oriented action.

Autocreation as person's intentional acting is therefore identified with multistage process in which the key significance is given to auto-reflection and acting revealing themselves in the attitudes of conscious, intentional and involved existence of following types:

- a) axiological and ontological – based on the opening of a subject to the meanings located in at least partly internalized values that give sense to subject's life in the context of constant defining of their own existence and personal standards worth pursuing;
- b) anticipative – connected with “anticipating intellectualization” of the future stadiums in the process of personal becoming, and involving determining the areas and goals of autocreational strives formulated in the perspective of future, anticipated life experiences;
- c) projecting – enabling the subject to realize the intellectual concepts of their own inner transformation (personal becoming) with the strivings towards the fulfillment of set and modified autocreational goals;
- d) exploring – prompting the subject to make continuous effort towards inner transformation, a process that involves constant searching and exploring of what is important in human life and setting next autocreational goals.

The selected aspects of existential reflection form the order of autocreational process and are identified with the creative forming of subject's life attitude. The fundamental thing for building and sustaining this order is to determine by an individual the values which are important for them and located high in their individual hierarchy. Those values, set apart as the basic ones, determine the individual's perception and understanding of the surrounding world, their place in it and particularly the subject's self-understanding. Such reflection helps the individual to create the symbolic axiological map that sets the main goals and “paths” worth following. They are connected with identifying so called values-signposts that became the centers in the net of meanings created by

the individual. The axiological insight in the essence of human existence prompts them to reflect on “who and how it is worth to become?”, a reflection revealing their life orientation that in turn determines the quality and character of autocreational strivings.

Autoreflexion in the ontological aspect is identified with searching for an answer to the questions about life and death<sup>4</sup>, about the nature of freedom and responsibilities of a man (K. Wojtyła, 2000, p. 448-456), about the essence of relation with other human being and its meaning when referred to obtaining a full existential satisfaction (V.E. Frankl, 2009, p. 165-168). Such investigation aims to define the concepts of one’s own life and themselves by defining and interpreting the meanings that reflect the ideas on how to live and who to be. More, finding the answers to those questions does not diminish with age but, conditioned by a need fundamental for the quality of human existence, that is the need of fulfilling the sense, reveals itself again and again. This search becomes even more actual and necessary with the next life experiences and loss of vital strength.

Viktor Frankl in his logotherapy theory also points that out. Among the three triads of categories identified with the main assumptions of this theory he also lists the triad of values associated with creation, experiences and attitude of a man (V.E. Frankl, 2010, p. 96). The observation made by the above mentioned author is significant in this context: “(...) one cannot change the fate; otherwise it would not be what it is. A man, however, can change at any moment; otherwise he would not be a man. That is the privilege of being a human and the inseparable part of human existence is the ability to constantly shape oneself” (Ibidem, p.100).

Such oriented attitude of the subject fosters anticipating that occurs through the correlation of generally imagined concept of self with setting autocreational goals realized in certain life situations. Further inner transformation depends in a large part on subject’s choices of autocreational goals and the ways to reach them. It is worth stressing that during anticipation of the future stages in the process of personal becoming determined by the choice of certain autocreational goals or their modification the subject takes an attempt to recognize and determine them. It happens before making the actual choice correlated with the image of oneself. The already mentioned “anticipating intellectualization” of inner change through autocreation involves determining subject’s real answer to the basic axiological question: “*towards what they strive and who and what like they want to be?*”. Anticipating fosters reaching beyond the limits of declarativeness and more full realization what the subject really cares for, with which vision of life orientations they presently want to identify. It leads to the final decision about the directions of inner transformation that in turn set the subject’s autocreational goals.

The projecting aspect closes up this reflection giving it the characteristic of the thorough, coherent, harmonized action taken in certain life situations, that leads the subject to fulfill the goals of their personal autocreation. Projective thinking opens them to the various options of multicontextual search of possibilities to realize the autocreational ambitions in certain situations (E. de Bono, 2001, p. 55-58). It does not resemble classic planning of actions that limit the freedom and invention of a subject due to the necessity to complete the tasks set in advance. It is rather individual determining of the strategy of organizing one’s thinking, ways of perception and reacting to certain circumstances which can be, according to the given situational context, naturally and intentionally used for personal creation. Thus, the projecting thinking means inventive search for and unconventional interpretation of the experienced events from the point of view of their autocreational “usefulness”. It refers to the constant concentration of the subject on the surrounding people and occurring events from the perspective of finding new possibilities to realize their autocreational ambitions.

The exploring aspect of investigating by the subject the essence of their own existence is identified with continuation of the autocreational activity. This activity is understood as a lifelong process involving another subjectively important goals. Experiencing joy from the “inner struggles with oneself” after reaching certain stages of personal autocreation still keeps the inspiring “existential freshness” and prompts to live one’s life oriented towards inventive autocreation. To abandon this way would lead to discarding the process of discovering and internalizing the values, understanding the meanings originated from them which have the power to reveal to the subject the deeper layers of humanity in the process of personal becoming. To abandon this way would mean that the subject rejects the strategies of creatively oriented personal fulfillment for the benefit of existential stagnation and the attitudes of imitative, thoughtless and conservative vegetation. The sense of autocreational attitude in the reflection on the essence and value of one’s own life reveals itself in the awareness of continuity and multistage character of the process of discovering the meaning of personal existence which is simply based on fulfilling the essence of humanity in one’s thoughts, feelings, desires, words and actions (ks. J. Tischner, 2005, p. 199-201).

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<sup>4</sup> The basic dilemma involves the contradictory interpretational perspectives; the first one skating that human life has meaning till the moment of Heath that determines its end, while the other says that the experience of death gives meaning to human life in a special way.

## Ageing as contemporary challenge in the area of social education policy

The effectiveness of actions aimed at activation of seniors in the social, cultural and educational aspect depends largely on the amount of benefits and pensions determining their material status and real possibilities to participate in various enterprises. Low allowances among the large group of seniors in Poland generate social and existential problems which limit their real participation in the social life or even completely exclude from it. Exclusion of seniors due to the economic reasons not only limits the possibilities of active and systematic involvement in the numerous events addressed directly to them but, due to the necessity to save their already meagre financial means, even imprisons them in their own homes. Because of the negative economic effects caused by the world crisis and financial difficulties in our country the costs of daily life grow constantly and occasional valorizations of pensions do not compensate them. As a result, constantly growing percentage of people in post-productive age live on the social minimum level. Very often seniors struggle to manage their financial means to cover the basic needs: accommodation, food and medicines (B. Szatur-Jaworska, 2000, pp. 73-75 and other).

We can add to the above the poor participation of seniors in post-productive age in the job market (GUS, 2007, p. 114-116). The research results clearly indicate that the large part of people in post-productive age is willing to continue their employment on permanent or temporary basis. However, the difficult country's economic and budget situation, relatively high unemployment rate, too strong competency on the job market in relation to the productive age groups and legislative impediments deprive Polish seniors of the real possibilities to have stable, satisfactory employment. It very often leads, especially among those seniors who declare the readiness to continue their professional activity, to the conviction of uneven treatment, causing their frustration and feeling of being excluded.

One of the symptoms that supports the accuracy of such observation about uneven treatment is regularity of almost geometrical decrease, along with crossing the age barrier of late or mature adulthood, of chances for active participation in local governments and politics. And this tendency has been settled for many years (E. Dubas, 2009, p. 116). Constant low percentage of people aged 60 and more that take part in the work of the parliament, local government structures or non-governmental organizations reveals the stereotypes disadvantageous for seniors, determining their exclusion from the main stream of the social life. These stereotypes are reflected in visualization strategies of election campaigns, both to the parliament and to the local governments. They are based on the popular in the electronic and traditional media cult of young age identified with beautiful body, vitality, sexuality, carelessness and the desire to live life to the full. Therefore, it is hard for seniors to become visible as they do not only look less attractive, act with a different dynamics but generally do not fit the presented ideal of a modern man. A man that draws attention with his image promoted on billboards and in the media and therefore gains the sympathy, popularity and trust of the public.

Thus, economic exclusion leads to social exclusion that in turn starts up psychosocial mechanisms that discourage seniors to undertake public, voluntary, educational, recreational or social activity. This situation shows the need to design a thoughtful social policy addressed to seniors that would guarantee them the higher quality of life not only regarding the social insurances system but also accepting their system of values, ensuring the equality of chances and treating them as subjects (L. Frąckiewicz, 1985, p. 158 and others). On the other hand, there is a need for initiating the long-term social campaigns that would really influence the state of social awareness freeing it from the stereotypes that destroy the image and social position of the contemporary elderly and re-shape the attitudes to modeling the intergenerational solidarity (B. Szatur-Jaworska, 2000, p. 121-123).

The European Parliament resolution of 21 February 2008 on the demographic future of Europe<sup>5</sup> refers to the difficult situation of financial allowances of a vast part of the retired. According to its postulates to undertake the efficient strategies for preventing social exclusion of post-productive age population, it is advisable not only to create the conditions for them to live in dignity but also to activate them in different areas of social life. It seems that two of four main ideas of the resolution are particularly meaningful: *The challenge of demographic renewal* and *The challenge of solidarity between the generations and regions*. The first one refers to undesirable changes in the demographic structure of the European societies from the point of view of preventing this process. In this case the main strategy is to create an active family-friendly policy that involves: promoting the value of family, procreation, parenthood, subjective treatment between family members, the state guarantees regarding social and financial provision for families, enabling parents to combine child care and professional work, promoting family forms of foster care, preventing behaviors and procedures that in various ways discriminate mothers and fathers.

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+20080221+ITEMS+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN#sdocta7>

The second mentioned idea refers to the process of ageing of the population, both as for the thoughtful, constructive therefore efficient prevention of potential negative effects of this process, and as for providing each individual, regardless of age, with the condition allowing autocreational work, deepening reflection upon the value and meaning of life. Demographic renewal is to take place in the aspect of subjective and equal participation of seniors in social and spiritual life. Reaching this goal means not only positive results increasing the life quality within this age group but in wider, macro-social way it means a real change in social attitudes which would result in opening of the younger generations of modern Europeans to partner cooperation with seniors not only those who only sustain their professional or social activity. So, the positive result in the broader sense would be opening to the values which humanize and harmonize social relations and lead to building intergenerational bridges that symbolize common understanding, cooperation and support.

The strategy leading to demographic renewal understood as obtaining new quality in mutual coexisting and cooperation and as a development is based on few necessary and fundamental postulates that include:

1. common awareness of the role of the elderly in keeping the intergenerational solidarity in order to reach:
  - a) social and economic cohesion through enhancing family and inter-generational solidarity and solidarity in the redistribution of resources;
  - b) wealth in service sectors known as “grey gold” through promoting and developing the participation of elderly people in society and economy as well as constant improvement of their financial and health living conditions (by valorization of pensions and social benefits to the level of average wage in Member States and by easy access to medical and care services);
  - c) participation of the elderly in voluntary activities of an educational, cultural and entrepreneurial nature and in combination with partners at local level;
2. common awareness on the meaning of the principle of inter-generational solidarity, a principle of excellence of the European social models that according to which working people cover the replacement incomes, social security and health costs of those who are not working; this principle is important to keep elementary social justice and should be maintained even in the situation of demographic imbalance;
3. guarantee of the legal security of social services of general interest in Community law, ensuring common access to social services for families, children, the elderly and dependants (due to chronic illness, disability or inability to function in society);
4. implementation of system solutions regarding flexible work schemes in order to encourage older people to remain active on the labor market;
5. promotion of inter-generational projects based on the transfer of knowledge, professional competencies and life experiences by older people to younger generations and on partner inter-generational cooperation.

## Summary

The quality of ageing process depend largely on the senior’s attitude towards their life situation and towards themselves. Attitude of caring about their physical, intellectual and spiritual well-being can cause ageing to be viewed as equally attractive and valuable period of life as childhood, adolescence or early adulthood. Failure to accept one’s age accompanied by dissatisfaction with the loss of physical fitness and fear of inevitable death may lead to seeing this stage of life as the worst one from which there is no escape. The quality of experiencing one’s own ageing and spiritual maturing depends largely on the way senior sees himself, his health condition and his future. One of the main threats to living the old age with dignity and optimism is remaining with the sense of isolation and uselessness that deprive of joy of life and weaken the willingness to search for its meaning.

Ageing, against all stereotypes and trends, is an extremely important, enriching and beautiful process of spiritual and moral growth towards all that leads to fulfilling the sense in certain acts of human existence. But for ageing to be fully seen by seniors this way, discovered by them anew and constantly explored it needs to be accepted and lived humbly and with optimism. Elzbieta Dubas studies this state of spirit of seniors who accept and experience this process consciously by referring to the metaphor of the art of ageing (E. Dubas, p. 13-19). It is worth to recall the following words by this author: the art of ageing is “(...) the ability to receive ageing as a “lesson” of life, a specific message on the truth about life and human. The art of ageing, undoubtedly difficult, acquired with years passing by and new experiences is linked to the knowledge of life, the ability to receive one’s fate and to cope in situation of getting old. It seems obvious that the art of ageing coexists with the art of living. The “school” of ageing is one of the most advanced “grades” in the “school of human life” (Ibidem, p. 14).

It is therefore, an art to age with dignity, joy and creativity. It is an art to overcome inner limitations, suffering and fears in order to strive for fulfilling the sense in one’s own life. It is an art to, despite illnesses, vanishing psycho-physical wellbeing, developing disfunctions, educate others, sensibilize them to what is good and important, encourage them to reflect on themselves, their biography and life choices by being a living example of unflinching hope and love.

Understanding ageing as the art of life, especially the school of life is fundamental to understand the essence of autocreation of a man who is personally mature, aware of life's fragility and timeless value of human deeds.

Autocreational activity of seniors can be realized in various areas of social life. One of the undoubtedly most desired and popular autocreational strategies in Poland is the educational activity. It seems that it should be in the group of the best stimulators of seniors' participation in social life and simultaneously a preventive measure for their exclusion from the main stream of social reality. Realization of autocreational strategy in the education sphere helps to prevent seniors from withdrawing from professional, public and, to some extent, social activity.

Surely, a list of areas positively affected by sustaining high educational activity by the elderly is meaningful as it includes:

- higher self-esteem based on awareness of one's higher competencies in: communication, IT, care and nursing;
- resourcefulness stemming from the higher competencies – it is the ability to deal with everyday difficulties of institutional, medical, care and interpersonal nature;
- life optimism strengthened by ridding of fear and aversion towards everything what is new and unknown and by modeling the attitude of openness to changes and cooperation with other people;
- awareness of many legal, medical and social dangers – seniors understand the sources and mechanisms of forming of various threats and are capable to protect themselves and their close ones from their negative effects;
- awareness in the area of medical, nursing and care prevention and therapy which strengthens understating of many aspect of biological ageing and effective counteraction in order to slow down the development of negative changes;
- resourcefulness in looking for institutional help; seniors who understand legal procedures applied in the social assistance institutions and local governments are more confident and self-dependent in contacts with the officials;
- developing interests and widening popular knowledge in various areas, in the frame of individually planned and updated self-realization activity;
- participation in various initiatives – social and even public on the local governing level (e.g. running for city council); it is a psychosocial mechanism according to which the higher awareness of one's competencies (often based on the level of education and professional experiences), the more a person is willing to take action in those areas;
- remaining professionally active and attractive on the labor market for longer and increasing one's satisfaction from professional activity which result from constant update of knowledge and competencies required in certain profession and developing those competencies.

Willingness and motivation to learn occurs in correlation with the level of education, social competencies and Internet access and ability to use IT on day-to-day basis. It is important for creativity and invention in setting the goals of personal autocreation. Knowledge and its ongoing actualization as well as finding new, important information broadens horizons, stimulates reflection, helps to comprehend the phenomena and quality of one's existence more fully (A. Fabiś, A. Wąsiński, 2008, p. 66-70). It affects shaping positive attitudes oriented at affirmation of life on each stage and promoting pro-health habits particularly desired in this period of life. The ability to use information technologies enables enriching one's knowledge e.g. regarding functioning of the body, methods of keeping good psychophysical shape, understanding the conditions for various diseases and their development stages or the importance of cooperation with the doctors.

The strategy of educational actions is also important for the openness of the future seniors on developing modern ways of doctor-patient cooperation which will hopefully be introduced to the health care system. They involve not only the organizational issues like registering a visit or ordering medicines via the Internet. The advanced medical technologies linked with the Internet would allow doctors to gather initial data and medical information, formulate initial diagnosis and even perform medical checks during treatment of the typical chronic diseases. Access to IT and the competencies to use it open new possibilities for medical consultation and therapy, increase the number of medical services and the sense of comfort during contact with the doctor. Yet, they will be unavailable for those seniors who would not undertake autocreational work in the education sphere.

It is worth noticing the range of initiatives aimed at stimulating activity of seniors in the areas of education and social life is constantly developing. Yet, they are realized in the form of various projects addressed mainly to the people living in the cities, there is much less similar actions taken in rural regions. In the area of education they include the universities of the third age, academies of seniors (50+), which due to developing offer of trainings, workshops, seminars and rehabilitation exercises become even more attractive for the elderly. In the area of social life there are seniors' clubs which help to sustain social contacts with friends from work or school and make new friendships. Seniors' clubs also allow creating emergency support groups for people in difficult life situation. An interesting and special offer for activation of seniors in recreational and indirectly

social aspect are tourist off-season holiday in Spain partly sponsored by EU funds. Reducing the costs of such holiday creates a real opportunity to use this offer and to see, for many seniors for the first time, that part of Europe they had so far known only from television, maps or information leaflets.

During the last years we can observe constantly increasing number of people of post-productive age participating in various undertakings such as the universities of the third age, academies of seniors (50+), cultural and artistic events and, in the recent years, also projects financed by local governments and EU funds organized by local associations and NGOs. It is undoubtedly important for popularization of the process of transferring the life activity of seniors beyond professional and family areas of social reality.

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