TYPES OF AGING OF ACTIVE OLDER LEARNERS IN EXISTENTIAL CONTEXT

Typy starzenia się aktywnych edukacyjnie osób starszych w kontekście egzystencjalnym

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Abstract

Being very much engaged in educational activities, active older learners are a unique group. That is why it is interesting to study how these people age. Educated and open people can best express their thoughts about old age through deep, reflection-oriented interviews. Thanks to qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with biographical elements, a typology of aging was developed, exposing the existential perspective. The typology is based on several characteristics: satisfaction from own old age, acceptance of old age, suffering, coping with existential concerns, resourcefulness, spirituality, or attitude towards death and dying. Four aging types were generated: confrontational, continuation, consumption, and constructive. Each represents different ways active older learners cope with everyday struggles and different mechanisms they introduce into their daily lives.

Keywords: aging typology, aging types, existential concerns, active older learners.

Streszczenie

Aktywnie edukacyjnie osoby starsze stanowią szczególną grupę. Stąd interesujące jest zbadanie, jak tacy ludzie się starzeją. Osoby wykształcone i otwarte mogą najlepiej wyrazić swoje przemyślenia na temat starości poprzez pogłębione, nastawione na refleksję wywiady. Dzięki jakościowej analizie częściowo ustrukturyzowanych wywiadów z elementami biograficznymi opracowano typologię starzenia się, eksponującą perspektywę egzystencjalną. Typologia ta opiera się na kilku cechach: zadowolenie z własnej starości, akceptacja starości, cierpienie, radzenie sobie z problemami egzystencjalnymi, zaradność, duchowość czy stosunek do śmierci i umierania. Stworzono cztery typy starzenia się: konfrontacyjny, kontynuacyjny, konsumpcyjny i konstruktywny. Każdy z nich przedstawia różne sposoby radzenia sobie z codziennymi trudnościami oraz różne mechanizmy, wprowadzane do swojego życia przez aktywnych edukacyjnie seniorów.

Słowa kluczowe: typologia starzenia się, typy starzenia się, troski egzystencjalne, aktywnie edukacyjnie osoby starsze.

Theoretical introduction

Aging types, or attitudes towards old age, have often been explored and described in the psychological and gerontological literature. As aging types can only be distinguished basing on specific characteristics, the typology must consider variables a researcher assumes as crucial, for example, personality traits, socio-demographic characteristics, social, historical, and biographical contexts, or attitudes. However, all typologies have limitations imposed by their classification criteria, and – hence – some need updating. At the same time, some refer to the populations within certain territories or cultures. So far, the main criteria used to develop aging typologies were regular activities (or lack thereof) taken up in specific areas, mainly work, free time, and social engagement (Czerniawska, 1998; Zych, 2010), as well as phenomena like life satisfaction or personality traits (Bromley, 1988; Halicki, 2010; Neugarten et al., 1968; Reichard et al., 1962). The aging typology presented here is based on seniors' attitudes and activities in the context of existential concerns, as passing and confrontation with their finitude was the leading theme in the biographical interviews we have conducted. Works by Irvin Yalom (1980) shed light on the problem of existential concerns, which include fear of death, existential isolation, meaninglessness, and freedom. The works by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1972) are also priceless. She was the first to discuss fears, suffering, needs, and death itself as a social and individual phenomenon with the dying persons. A milestone in such explorations are publications by Viktor Frankl (1971, 2010), who focused on the meaning of life and freedom. These two main existential concerns were the foundation of his therapeutic concept of meaning-based therapy (logotherapy). It is also worth remembering the physical nature of aging, which can also determine mental aging (Lightman, 2023). Interesting gerontology research is conducted by Adam Zych (2013), who calls existential concerns existential anxieties and threats. They include life balance, loneliness, suffering, and loss in the material/physical (loss of wealth or physical abilities) and spiritual/mental sense (loss of loved ones and own life). Existential concerns which result from the awareness of one's finiteness generate specific, more or less conscious attitudes and – according to the terror management theory – when exposed to mortality, they trigger some anxiety buffers (Greenberg et al., 1986).

For this reason, persons who integrate thoughts about their death will design their old age differently than those who tend to despair due to this fact (Erikson, 1963). Even though they entail psychical discomfort, existential concerns are a necessary growth factor in old age (Oleś, 2011). On the one hand, they feed life wisdom. On the other hand, older adults can successfully solve these problems thanks to their wisdom (Fabiś et al., 2022; Sternberg, 2003). The proposed typology stands out by incorporating attitudes towards existential concerns into the criteria differentiating the individual aging process. This perspective highlights the spiritual aspects of aging against the psycho-social background.

Methodological grounds

The main aim of the research was to develop a typology of the aging of active senior learners, taking into account their existential concerns. The biographical strategy defined by Uwe Flick (2010) was used in the qualitative research, which is the basis of analyses. The authors focus on the participants' personal experiences and the starting point of their existential problems. The constructivist paradigm was used (Creswell, 2013). It will be the starting point for further research procedures. The constructivist approach is based on subjectivism; it assumes many different, constructed, and reconstructed social worlds. The researcher must refrain from using his, or her values, and beliefs during the joint data construction with participants. When confronted with a broader context, subjective experiences, opinions, values, and beliefs are explored. Qualitative methods are used as they enable the interpretation of meanings. The participation paradigm assumes that reality is co-created through the reception of the shared one–objective and generated by the individual's mind. In the research project discussed here, the biographical perspective is inevitable. When discussing suffering, loneliness, or life balance, the narrators must refer to their biography and interpret it.

For this reason, the biographical perspective was applied through a qualitative semi-structured interview with biographical-narrative elements. A semi-structured life-world interview attempts to understand themes of the daily lived world from the subjects' perspectives. This interview form seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' lived world concerning interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 2010). The interview used in the study is a free conversation initiated by the researcher and follows the previously determined points: themes or questions. During such an interview, the interviewer may suggest focusing on a particular theme, delicately directing the interview, confronting the interviewee, and freely shaping the conversation. It is assumed that the researcher is committed to reporting the events, meanings, interpretations, and values with consideration to – or rather from – the respondent's perspective, being simultaneously a co-creator of the produced reality (Gibbs, 2018). Thus, the main research question will refer to a description of the context of behaviors and is formulated as follows: What type of aging do active older learners represent in the context of the existential concerns they experience?

Participants

The study was conducted from 25 October to 26 November 2016 in two large cities in central and southern Poland. Before the implementation, the research team had obtained the consent of the Committee of Ethics in Scientific Research to conduct the interviews. The narrators were recruited from University of the Third Age (U3A) students. This group is of interest to us in several respects. It is a subpopulation with

relatively high social capital, relatively better health, and mostly higher education (Zielińska-Więczkowska & Kędziora-Kornatowska, 2014).

Moreover, from the perspective of the gerotranscendence theory (Tornstam, 2005), the activity they engage in helps older adults come to terms with the finiteness of their existence and develop a personal attitude towards existential issues. Participants were purposefully selected as individuals actively engaged in non-formal education—in this case, they were students at the Universities of the Third Age. They were further selected according to age, which ranged from 60 to 86 years, and according to narrative abilities that characterize active older students, such as the ease of formulating thoughts, verbalizing their experiences and expressing emotions, authenticity, and ease in sharing their experiences. This resulted in a sample of 14 female and 4 male narrators. The interviews lasted from one hour to two hours and 40 minutes. All the participants received accurate information about the research, the topic of the interview, and data confidentiality. Researchers obtained verbal consent from the narrators for participation in the research.

Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded – upon the consent of the narrators and then transcribed. Before analysis, the transcriptions were re-read and replayed to proofread, make corrections, and add notes or transcription symbols. All transcriptions were imported to the Nvivo 11 Pro software on an ongoing basis. The software was beneficial during coding and categorizing. The subsequent stages of analysis generated the need for ongoing modifications of the code and category structure and a minor correction of the concept map. The coding procedure was based on M. Lichtman's Cs (Code-Category-Concept) principle (Lichtman, 2012). It is a cycle of data transformation from raw data to theoretical concepts. The comparison was made as a case cross-analysis (nomothetic approach) to develop the typology of aging and coping strategies of active senior learners and identify similarities and differences between the cases. This explained these differences and similarities and discovered the relationships between the codes and social contexts (Gibbs, 2018).

Results

The narrators show two dominating attitudes towards old age as a general human phenomenon. The first is based on viewing old age and the general passing phenomenon as critical and terrifying because they lead to death. They are hard to accept, and one must stay young to stop the degradation process. The narrators notice this form of aging in other inactive, ill, or dependent persons. Thus, it does not refer to the respondents, most of whom do not see themselves as older adults. They are not infirm.

They decide about their lives and are independent and, first of all, educationally active. Involvement in numerous activities is a symptom of youth, or at least the extension of middle adulthood.

> Well, some people may experience it differently there. I have friends who were doing very well, were wealthy, they were doing very well, and they lost everything because of some stupidity. And it was not related to the disease or anything like that, but with a dissolute lifestyle, I would say, and they are now in a terrible depression, well, then, then... they should make this balance, because, because they did not take care, they have no relationship good with grandchildren, with children, well… (Katherine)

Thus, when hearing the term old age, the narrators were confused, concerned, sometimes surprised, or even indignant that they were classified into this group. All because the old age concept is perceived as unfavorable. Therefore, using euphemisms like mature, in their autumn years is safer. In other words, the narrators who only see the negative aspects of old age do not feel old.

Moreover, some of them are very satisfied with their present condition. This results from the assumption that believing one is not old and engaging in activities assigned to non-old people allows one to stay young and happy, whereas admitting that one is old means degradation of life.

> In fact, I am now having the best time of my life, and I am pleased about it. I have a lot of joy, I also have a little playful Beni (a name), and not everyone accepts it, but I do not care anymore. I go my way. I have my plan, my dreams, that's why I'm a little here and a little there. (Bernadette)

However, not all respondents who view old age as unfavorable are satisfied with their present life. Some feel discomfort and, in addition, are afraid of the future and anxious that their situation may worsen. That is why they strive to improve their life. They hope it will be better in old age.

> Well, I'm young in spirit, young in heart. I'm interested in many things. I'm curious about the world and interested. Sometimes I don't have enough time. (Stella)

Even though it connotes death, finiteness – as an isolated phenomenon – seems more acceptable than old age: the already experienced, own old age, or the one to come. It is not an abstract anymore, but refers directly to "me". Individuals who do not feel old employ mechanisms to prevent, or maybe only ignore, further developmental changes and remain convinced about their youthful spirit. It is an undetermined state of consciousness that, against all visible physical changes, remains unchanged and in harmony with the attributes of youth.

> I try not to think about it. I know it is waiting for everyone, but I still feel young at heart, and I don't go that far. It's as if it doesn't apply to me yet. This is my strategy: it doesn't apply to me. I still have so many years ahead of me that I don't think about it at all. (Katherine)

Even though the attitude of not accepting own old age dominates among the active senior learners, many cases reveal different approaches. It involves acknowledging one's old age and recognizing the changes, the passing of time, and finiteness. This attitude results mainly from the good patterns left by the older generations, which confirms the theory that good aging patterns inspire generations that approach their old age to create it actively. Old age is acceptable, or even worth following, and, even more important, it does not cause anxiety. This type of attitude towards one's own old age, which accepts the passing phenomenon, will entail the acceptance of one's own old age, though sometimes as a future rather than a present condition.

> As every age has its rights, this age also has its rights, and let's say you have to get used to it gradually. Many things do not fall out for me anymore. I cannot do much, but I can give myself a lot and still do a lot. You have to want. That's how I think about old age. (Tracey)

To summarize, there are two perspectives the narrators view old age. Those who do not accept passing see old age more as a dark future, where old age is wrong and associated with suffering and many other hardships, and, therefore, one must defend oneself against it. They may feel satisfied with their lives, but some already experience old age as a hardship. The other perspective – of those who see aging as natural and acceptable refers to this phenomenon in the present reality, which is viewed as very positive because it offers many opportunities. All respondents in this group are happy with their present situation.

> Well, I'll be 76 soon. This age is the most exciting period of my life. The most exciting thing is because I already have a formed personality and stability in connection with this spiritual, I have a formed idea of what a life partner is, what is a friend, who is it, sorry, what is a family, and many other things that can be enjoyable or unpleasant in life. (Isabella)

Almost all agree that old age is a natural stage of development for every human being and that one needs to prepare for it and constantly create it. Everyone is personally responsible for their old age and must constantly strive to be satisfactory – such a perspective results from the existential meaning of freedom. Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The capacity to create ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness (May, 1994).

The state the narrators are in (calling it old age or not) has its good sides. Some even declare that it is the best time in their life. The main advantages are freedom from many responsibilities, wisdom, and experience. They allow us to taste life, enjoy the gift of free time, and manage it creatively. Thus, it is the time that can be managed freely, time for the self, developing interests and activities abandoned in the previous stages of life, and discovering new areas to satisfy individual needs. Some use their time to benefit others to help and support younger generations or their peers.

> It is spiritual as the need to do something. As a need to please someone. Will it be a family or friends and not necessarily in the form of a gift, but not necessarily a costly and purchased

gift. This could be something that only speaks to my memory. And it will be a small matter. And I am satisfied. And just like me, get a gift, yes, but for me, the best gift is a smile, a good word, a visit from my relatives. And I live it. (Lydia)

The main disadvantages of old age are losses, with the most common loss of health and physical and mental condition. However, being an active senior obliges to take care of this sphere of life. Therefore, many of the respondents are engaged in health-related activities. They are aware that their independence and self-decisiveness depend on their physical condition. The most grievous losses are the deaths of loved ones, family members, friends, and colleagues. Experiencing grief is a severe problem for the narrators who admit that they struggle with it. It is similar to existential concerns. Some individuals are enslaved by loneliness, and for many, fear of suffering prevents them from planning the future. The narrators are not always aware that they still have to face the developmental challenge of making a retrospective review of their lives. Only a few have already attempted to sum up their life experiences.

Not. Thinking about what was and that it could be otherwise is entirely sterile. It is you who must live today and at this moment. (Tracey)

The participants are not reflexive. They do not see the need to explore passing issues, the absolute meaning of life, or death's mystery. They are not ready for such intellectual and emotional effort, but they assume that a time for it will come sooner or later, or maybe on their deathbed.

The most significant such cataclysm was my husband's death, because I felt as if I was complicit, then screwed up, ma'am, that is, wronged by fate, well... this was my biggest shock in life. (Hannah)

The analysis of the material gathered enabled the development of the typology of aging, focusing on some features like accepting own old age, learning activity, life resourcefulness, and even religiousness or spiritual life.

Table 1

Types of aging of Polish active senior learners in existential context

	CONFRONTATIONAL	CONTINUATION	CONSUMPTION	CONSTRUCTIVE
Satisfaction from own old age	Average and low level of satisfaction from own old age, experiencing old age worries	Very high level of satisfaction from the present condition	Very high level of satisfaction from the present condition, enjoying life	Very high level of satisfaction from own old age
Acceptance of old age / passing	Very low or average level of acceptance of old age and passing	Very low level of acceptance of old age and passing	High level of acceptance of old age and passing	High level of acceptance of old age and passing

	CONFRONTATIONAL	CONTINUATION	CONSUMPTION	CONSTRUCTIVE
Activity	Activity at an average level	Activity at the highest level	Activity at a high level	Activity at a high or average level
Resourcefulness in old age	Overcoming obstacles, fighting, struggling with everyday life problems, but using not very constructive, and little effective methods to confront existential and every-day problems	Resourcefulness at the highest level	Resourcefulness at the highest level	Resourcefulness at a high level
Purpose of activities / meaning of life	Trying to facilitate their personal develop-ment and, in a nar-rowed scope, act for the benefit of others.	Activity focused on personal development and supporting others. Easily identify the meaning of life in old age	Personal development is the meaning of life. Activity focused exclu-sively on personal de-velopment	Acting for the benefit of others and own de-velopment
Religiousness	No or minimum religiousness	No or low level of religiousness	Religiousness at different levels – higher level dominates, usually without the involvement of the church	Religiousness at dif-ferent levels – low level dominates, usu-ally without the involvement of the church
Spirituality	Uncovered or directed towards relations with other people, nature and art	Develop their spiritual-ity through relations with other people, na-ture, art and the para-normal world	Develop their spiritual-ity through interactions with other people. Strong need for spiritual development.	Identify spirituality with deep relation-ships, art, and nature.
Dying and death	High level of death and dying anxiety	Extremely high level of death and dying anxiety	Average level of death and dying anxiety	Average level of death and dying anxiety
Loneliness	High and very high level of loneliness	Very low level of lone-liness	No sense of loneliness	No sense of loneliness. Very rich and frequent interactions with other people
Life balance	Life balance at aver-age level with domi-nating negative evaluation	Good life balance, with dominating posi-tive aspects, even though with many failures experienced	Positive life balance with many failures experienced	More successes, but also many failures
Suffering	Experience psychical suffering and loss of the loved ones	Loss of the loved ones is a strong experience	Most often, suffering is caused by losing the loved ones. High level of fear of suffering	Experience suffering in many ways

Source: Authors' own compilation

Another equally important issue was the perception of existential concerns such as finding goals in life, attitude towards death, loneliness, life balance, and suffering. Four types of aging of active senior learners were created. The occurrence and strength of some of the characteristics were based only on the narrator's statements and their reactions during the interview.

The first group is the confrontational type. Its representatives experience the hardships of old age. The female narrators recall difficult experiences from their childhood and adolescence. They constantly confront reality. They excessively struggle with daily problems and existential concerns. They do not accept their old age. They are not as active as other narrators. They instead focus on solving their everyday problems and personal development, though sometimes others are also beneficiaries of their actions. The narrators do not always reach their goals. Sometimes, they are not very resourceful, even though one cannot deny their determination and perseverance. At the same time, they are most open to accept professional support if they cannot cope with something. They are also entirely irreligious. They show a level of fear of death and dying. Losing their loved ones is very difficult, but their most significant problem is loneliness.

The second group was identified as the continuation type, as its representatives tend to continue to live their middle adulthood lifestyle. It allows them to keep the present condition as long as possible. The narrators are happy, some even more than when they were young. One of the characteristics of this group is self-focus, resulting from the joy of life they experience in their present stage of life. However, they can also seriously engage in activities towards others. They keep a good life balance and emphasize that they are "young at heart". They take care of themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually. They are the most active of all the groups. They are very resourceful and do not accept any assistance or support from anyone. They do not feel alone – loneliness is a foreign concept to them. However, their main problem turns out to be the exceptionally high level of death anxiety. They do not accept the transience of human life and cannot come to terms with it. They struggle to accept their finitude as it does not fit their active and engaged lifestyle. They declare themselves unbelievers and hardly believe, but they all view their spiritual life as rich. It is typical for this group that individuals participate in some original spiritual explorations like talking to the dead, or contacting the spirits.

The third type of aging of active seniors may be called consumption, as while enjoying the present life, the narrators focus exclusively on their satisfaction. The consumption lifestyle can also be understood as a need for self-realization, exploration, fulfillment, and personal desires. It involves spontaneity, intense experiences, and emotions. Participants are content with their present situation. Hardly any of them feel lonely, their life balance is positive, and they are active and committed to their development. They accept their mortality. They are happy in their old age and see

themselves as wise, mature, and living the best time. The fear of death and dying is at an average level, and the main problem these narrators face is the high level of fear of suffering. They are also more religious – it is the most religious group. Its represent-atives express the enormous longing for spiritual development. What they miss the most is a deep relationship with God.

The last aging style was called constructive, as this adjective describes this group's most characteristic feature – constructing the social reality through engaging in activi-ties to benefit others. The least homogeneous group consists of active persons who fully accept their old age, are not very religious, and are satisfied with their lives. Their life balance involves more successes, even though they can see many failures. They are very resourceful and like the company of other people; thanks to that, they do not feel lonely. They realize their spiritual life through relationships with others and contact with art and nature.

Discussion and conclusions

Research by Halicki shows a similar dichotomy of attitudes towards old age: old age is the fate one must submit to, and old age is a challenge one must meet (Halicki, 2010). The aging types generated here can be compared with other classic types ex-cept for the disengaged ones – those with a low activity level and on the condition that similarities can be found for specific layers only. Many characteristics analyzed by the authors cannot be compared because different sampling criteria or methodologies significantly limit the comparison procedure. Similarities in the attitudes towards daily challenges can be observed, especially when compared to the integrated person-ality concept proposed by Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin. There is a significant similarity to the re-organizer pattern – engaged in many activities, feeling young, re-placing the lost activities with new ones – especially the constructive and consumption type, even though the latter is focused on the self.

Apparently consumption and constructive types could also fit within the mature type proposed by Reichard, Livson, and Peterson (1962). They, too, accept their old age, are satisfied, value relationships with others, and keep a positive life balance. The armored type – well adapted yet coping with fears, is close to the confrontational type. In the typology Filsinger and Sauer (1978) proposed, many characteristics of one of the types of adjustors – Fighter, fit the confrontational type. Both fear their fate, but take activities to relieve the anxiety. Both feel lonely, and find it hard to accept a loss. The proposed typology is original, thanks to the criteria adopted. The comparison of the aging types with coping strategies with existential concerns (Fabiś, 2018) clearly shows that even among active senior learners, the dominating strategies are the ones that protect from direct engagement in reflection upon one's mortality. Only those who strongly create their old age (confrontational and constructive) try to face the

problem of their finitude. These efforts involve constantly searching for spirituality in relationships with other people, art, and nature. In turn, very resourceful and active types with positive life balance focus their efforts in old age mainly on their development (confrontational and consumption). They are not interested in solving existential problems. They repress thoughts about these and try to ignore them, or postpone confrontation with them infinitely. Using the presented typology makes it possible to adapt appropriate care, educational, and support activities to help older people cope with their aging process.

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