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Prevention of marginalization of older people

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Abstract

In search of optimum patterns of the prevention of marginalization of older people, this article outlines some European models of educational projects of universities of the third age, aimed at their multifunctional activity related to compensation of social deficits connected with crossing the threshold of the retirement age. By signaling problems related to the growing demographic old age and the functioning of a negative stereotype of the third tierce of life, an attempt is made to show the main directions of actions, which – in the framework of the personalization of individuals through education – should be adopted to reduce and hamper the phenomenon of growing social marginalization of the population of old people.

Introduction

In accordance with the interpretation predominant in countries of the European Union, social marginalization is identified in the situation of a break-up of social ties, irrespectively of causes - in cases of exclusion from social structures or the loss of the possibility of participation in the life of social groups, communities, inability to use public institutions, inability to establish varied social interactions which stimulate development. Treated as a refusal of the acknowledgment of definite public rights, or as the lack of possibility of making use of them, it may affect in equal measure the unemployed, homeless, handicapped, intellectually retarded, as well as people who

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leave penal institutions, and people with low education, helpless, incompetent, poor, devoid of access to institutions of public life, or those marked with a specific stigma of uselessness, the so-called “asocial” individuals. The search for optimum patterns of the prevention of further marginalization of the human capital, which is accumulated in the population of people retiring from professional activity in the period of Poland’s adjustment to European standards is, therefore, to be recognized as an extremely important challenge of the present time.

Social marginalization of older people

From the Reports On Social Development in Poland, prepared by UNDP within the framework of the Programme of the United Nations for the Development, old age in Poland is neither worthy nor even active. The majority of the population entering the threshold of the retirement age² is menaced by poverty and various handicaps. In the light of the next Reports (Raport UNDP, 1999; 75 in.; Human, 2011; Ranking, 2019, p. 1–18) every tenth Pole in the retirement age had income below the poverty line, and the threat of poverty grew proportionally to age (Trafiałek, 2014, *passim*; Report, 2002, p. 6).

The marginalization of older people has different sources and symptoms than that in the case of young people, potentially able to work. A readable signal of its occurrence in public life, in institutions of culture, rest centers, in tourist offices, in theatres, cafes, restaurants, in media, in private and outpatient health clinics, and even in shops and services is the absence of elderly people. The elderly are absent where life pulsates, where contact with people improves mood, not because they are not interested, and that they prefer “doing nothing”, or just staring for hours at the tv screen, or watching people from their window, but because they cannot afford or simply they are afraid of the contact with the incomprehensible external world.

Poverty combined with limited efficiency of the old age, with threats of sickness, and often with loneliness too, creates a sufficiently extensive space for isolation and exclusion of this social group. When the above-mentioned deficits are accelerated by psychological, physical, technical and informational helplessness, a feeling of confusion and uselessness, as well as the fear of the incomprehensible progress of the world which promotes youth, enterprise, and mobility - social marginalization becomes inevitable. It’s constant forecasting in the course of gerontological analyses, interviews and evaluations (Trafiałek, 2002, p. 179–196; Human, 2011, *passim*) allows to state that the social policy faces the magnitude of great challenges, and coping with them requires intensive strategic actions orientated towards community activation, education, integration, compensation, competency reinforcement and co-operation on all the possible levels of public dialogue.

2 In 2018 people aged 60 and more made 24,8%, and those aged 65 and more 17,0% of the total population, GUS 2019, Statistical Yearbook 2018, GUS, Warsaw, p. 208.

Universities of the third age in Western Europe—selected models of compensatory actions in the countries of West Europe—the care for a good mental condition of the elderly is expressed by the openness of the educational system, creation of integration centers, engagement of the elderly in self-help activity, activation of the local community, co-operation with the generation of young people, travel facilitation, access to culture, and first of all assurance of access to health care, rehabilitation and resources, which enable the elderly to realize their extensive needs. The most popular form of prevention of the marginalization of the third generation is engaging them in the activity of educational centers, commonly defined as the “Universities of the Third Age”.

There are 257 such centers in the United Kingdom, with a membership of over 40,000 (in 218 centers in England alone); in France, the number of centers is 304; in Italy 282; in Spain 52; in the Czech Republic 47; in Finland 28; in Switzerland 25, in Holland 24. In the late 1990s, the International Organization of Universities of the Third Age (AIUTA) listed over 1200 Universities of the Third Age in Europe alone (Halicka, Halicki, 1999, p. 24; Czerniawska, 1999, p. 308).

Generally, in the countries of West Europe, permanent education is treated as an activity which brings advantages both to individuals and the whole society, as the condition of social development, a form of counteraction of unemployment, as a new lifestyle and an effective method of liquidating the feeling of social isolation (Białyżyt, 2019, s. 124–129). In most European universities of the third age, the integrative function often achieves a higher rank than the educational function. Integration itself is treated in European standards as both an intra- and intergenerational process.

For example: in Great Britain, self-help groups and primarily voluntary work are predominant among educational forms addressed to the elderly. In England, educational work is focused mainly on usefulness, training and practical actions, which does not collide with the general accessibility of education, and it favors breaking a negative stereotype of old age characterized by attitudes based on claims. Education centers and open universities that operate in England and Wales, as well as open universities, treat adult education as an efficient social movement that meets the needs of both individuals and communities. All forms of educational activity of elderly people combine the educational function with the integrative one, a higher priority being given to the latter.

In Germany, three types of centers function for seniors, and all of them apart from performing the educational function, have an integrative character. They include popular universities, training centers, academies for seniors and institutions of higher education open for everybody (Halicki, 2000, p. 52–110). At least two of the above-mentioned forms optimize co-operation and intra- and intergenerational integration.

In Italy, where the highest demographic old age was recorded in Europe in 2000 (18% of the total general public are people at the age of 65 years and more), and the level of education of the oldest generation is very low (in the category of age of 65 years and more 10% is complete and functional illiterate people, and in the age range above 50 years over 80% of the population has only elementary education) – this popula-

tion is treated as a priority group receiving special care of the authorities of all ranks. Educational institutions carry out many special educational projects, but the highest priority is attributed to initiatives that serve the development of the local community and the promotion of individuals. Many programs are aimed at the stimulation of cognitive processes of the representatives of the oldest generation, encouraging them to broaden their knowledge, but generally, the highest priority in education is given to affiliational and integrative functions. The main objective is, therefore, consolidation of suitable attitudes towards old age, acceptance, activeness, support of social status and a good frame of mind (Statistical Yearbook, 2001, p. 615; Czerniawska, 1996, p. 67–80).

Elderly people are treated in Italy as the rock of experience, tradition and universal values. Of great importance in proposals addressed to them is intergenerational integration, co-operation in the relation lecturer - student, analysis of initiatives and individually formulated self-assessment. Their awareness of history is being shaped; they begin to understand better their own old age, they are assisted to find a satisfying and feasible occupation which will be useful for the community. Universities of the third age enroll even people who are a little over 30. People aged 60 and more make up only 40% of the total, which testifies about a full intergenerational integration, accomplished in Italy in educational forms. Despite a low level of education, Italian senior citizens are some of the best organized socially active groups. They have their discussion forum on the columns of nationwide newspapers; they also have active trade unions; they can fight for their rights and they know their value. Generational and intergenerational integration in Italy deserves special attention because a well-organized activity gives a feeling of social usefulness, solidarity, and protects elderly people from loneliness and isolation, and guarantees prestige.

The marginalization of the third generation is reduced by both proper education and activation. In Great Britain adult education has a character of an efficient public movement, which engages the elderly in self-help, intergenerational, and voluntary actions, development of social needs and personality. In Germany international tourism is popularized with success. In Italy, where the group of elderly people is treated as preferential, some adequate strategies of the activation of individuals, territorially diverse and appropriate to needs, are applied by making an opportunity of active creation of the life of the local community. Generally, actions based on assumptions that the elderly, who have ample life experience, cultivate tradition and care for national identity, deserve special attention.

Universities of the third age in Poland – current state and needs

Polish universities of the third age started to come into being in 1975. The chain of universities, comprising at present 640 centers (in 2011 – 185 centers) is treated as a special congregation of elites of seniors, as they are as a rule the only forms of organized education and social integration addressed to the elderly in Poland (Universities,

2019, p. 1–7.). The centers which function within the structure of academic education have the richest tradition and experience in effective coping with the needs of the representatives of the third generation. They constantly extend their programs and they enjoy growing popularity both among persons in the retirement age and those who for different reasons (often due to unemployment) have abandoned professional activity. In accordance with the expectations of students, they have an open character, filling an enormous social demand for lifelong education in their communities, integration, consolidation, intra- and intergeneration co-operation, compensation, support in the preparation to old age and optimum use of potential, which it carries.

Activity, supporting mobility, efficiency which generates the feeling of psychical wellbeing, in dependence of the range and character, may fulfill manifold functions: compensatory in the situation of the loss of important public roles; educational, adaptive, revitalizing and integrative. However, it always serves to satisfy the psychophysical needs connected with age, with undertaking new roles and social and family assignments; with the necessity of adaptation to limited physical efficiency; with the need of developing attitudes that facilitate understanding and internalization of the new determinants of the quality of life.

Conclusion

At the threshold of the 21st century, old age, being the natural stage of life, cannot be perceived through the perspective of the stereotype no future. This is a new occupation, a new role, and a new assignment, to which one should not only get prepared, but one should also constantly improve oneself. This is the essence of individual responsibility and the basis for disseminating the idea of education for old age, in accordance with the principles of democracy, personalization of individuals through education. From the social point of view, the problems of old age are always related to the lack of good patterns of conduct, with the lack of alternatives for loneliness, helplessness, and marginalization. Solutions applied in West European countries show that the best alternative is the endeavor to socialize the aging process, promote lifelong education and to implement the passwords “Add life, health, and activity to years”.

The activity of elderly people, orientated to the prophylaxis of social marginalization, irrespective of its various forms (educational, affiliational, integrative, protective, compensatory), always exerts influence on the improvement of the quality of life, on the co-operation with the community, on the improvement of the psychophysical condition of individuals (Białyżyt, 2019, p. 124). In countries with rich traditions of varied adult education, one can notice an endeavor to achieve the personalization of individuals, to emphasize the role and the rank of individual choices of potential recipients. Its objective is to create stable foundations of a community based on social justice, equality, solidarity, activity and the right of dignified life in its all stages. All

forms of social activity of the representatives of the third generation are subordinated to the satisfaction of needs which appear together with the termination of professional activity and change in social status.

Demographic old age has become at present a ubiquitous phenomenon, and as it results from demographic forecasts, at least by the year 2050 it will be manifested by an increasing tendency. The highest rate of social aging occurs in Japan, the United States, Canada and in the countries of Western Europe, but most of these societies have managed to outdistance changes occurring within the demographic structure; therefore, it is worthwhile to conclude their experience.

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