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The Leisure Time of Older People in Light of Activity Theory

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss the problem of older people's leisure time from the perspective of activity theory. The starting point for these considerations was to clarify the concepts of "old age" and "aging." Then, the most important issues of human activity in late adulthood are presented, and the main assumptions of activity theory are described. Next, the concept of leisure time is defined, the features of leisure time activity are discussed, and the functions of leisure time are outlined. Attention is also paid to the ways seniors spend their time and the types of leisure activity they prefer. Additionally, the problem of old people's leisure time is presented in the context of activity theory, with special attention paid to the activation of seniors.

Introduction

Activity is a prerequisite for a satisfying life regardless of age (Miszczak, 2010, p. 27); satisfying all human needs depends on it. Inactivity can lead to a loss of acceptance from other people, to loneliness (Dziegielewska, 2006, pp. 161–162), or even to social exclusion. Therefore, it is important to have "the capacity to live an active, conscious, intentional, positive, valuable life, and to create and realize one's own concept of life even in old age" (Pikuła, 2011,

p. 110). Research from the past few decades indicates that the daily activity of older people in Poland is focused primarily on home and family matters (e.g., Brzezińska, 2011; Trafiałek, 2013; Zrałek, 2014; Różański, 2016). This also applies to seniors' free time. There may be various reasons for this state of affairs, e.g., health problems, lack of faith in one's own abilities, and fear of criticism from other people (Trafiałek, 2013, p. 199).

Technological and socioeconomic progress and the development of medicine have contributed to the increase in the amount of free time, which is no longer characteristic of only the privileged social classes. Free time has become an important component of quality of life (Denek, 2011, pp. 89–90). The amount of free time and the ways it is spent largely "depend on the quality of one's work, professional training and development, and everyday well-being and health" (Denek, 2011, p. 90). Thus, free time fulfills many important functions in the life of an individual, including elderly people. A senior's use of free time may, however, depend on various factors that shape their life situation. In the face of the aging of Polish society, this problem is of particular relevance. It entails the need for systematic scientific research and action, in the fields of education, prevention, and social assistance.

The purpose of this article is to present the problem of free time for older people in the context of activity theory, with particular attention on the role of the activation of seniors.

Activity in late adulthood

Old age, also known as late adulthood (Steuden, 2011), is an issue addressed by representatives of various scientific disciplines, e.g., sociology, psychology, and pedagogy (Wawrzyniak, 2017a, p. 42). The researchers define this concept in many different ways. According to Elżbieta Trafiałek, old age is a natural period of life that follows youth and maturity. It is the culmination of a dynamic aging process (Trafiałek, 2006, p. 69). Old age involves

a decrease in physical fitness, loss of mobility, weakening of immunity (biological and physiological old age), limited flexibility to adapt to any changes, and—in the socioeconomic context—also often with pauperization, loneliness (mental old age), reliance on the help of others

(economic old age), and displacement to the margins of social life (social old age). (Trafiałek, 2006, p. 69)

Furthermore, aging means "natural changes in the human body, varying in degree and speed, which reduce the intensity of life processes. It is a continuous and irreversible process" (Pikuła, 2013, p. 23). As a phase of human life, old age should be analyzed in connection with the aging process and its consequences (Szarota, 2004, p. 24).

The onset of late adulthood is usually defined as 60 or 65 years of age. Old age, however, is not a static stage of human life, because a senior's physical and mental fitness changes over the years. For this reason, late adulthood is divided into shorter stages (Pędich, 2002, p. 917). According to the categorization proposed by the World Health Organization, three subperiods are distinguished within old age: early old age/aging (60–74 years), middle old age/old age (75–89 years), and late old age/long-lived (90+ years) (Błachnio, 2019, p. 26).

As Zofia Szarota notes, "in the social dimension, old age changes a person's previous social roles, their social position, and the attitudes of society towards them" (Szarota, 2010, p. 39). One of the main developmental tasks in old age is to take on the new roles and activities that come with retirement (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2016, p. 27). Ending one's professional career leads to significant changes in the structure of human activity, as one of the main roles that a person played during his or her life becomes eliminated (or significantly reduced), and as a consequence, other roles are also transformed. Retirement, therefore, requires acclimation to these changes, and to the new social situation (Synak, 1987, p. 105). The circumstances that facilitate coming to terms with the new role (of retiree) include "being able to realize previously made plans, devoting oneself to a forgotten passion, hobbies, traveling, visiting friends, family, gardening, expanding the scope of household chores, the ability to perform a specific occupation, or continuing work in a different form" (Wawrzyniak, 2017a, p. 58). Adaptation is more difficult when someone did not exhibit or pursue non-work-related interests or engage in other types of activity during their professional career (Wawrzyniak, 2017a, p. 58). Hence, gerontologists often stress the need to lead an active life—both before and after retirement.

Generally speaking, activity means the ability to act, the energy that gives one the chance to communicate and keep in touch with other people, which is especially important for older people (Kaczmarczyk & Trafiałek, 2007, p. 116). The activity of seniors is often defined broadly as active participation in social, cultural, or intellectual life (Miszczak, 2010, p. 27). Numerous classifications also take into account other forms of elderly people's activity. Aleksander Kamiński points to two main types: taking up esteemed and useful work (e.g., continued work in one's profession, employment in another profession, intra-family activity, and social volunteering) and developing one's interests (e.g., physical exercise, clubs, and artistic or intellectual work) (Kamiński, 1986, pp. 115–117). We can also break down seniors' activity into the following types: home/family, cultural, professional, social, educational, religious, and recreational (Chabior, 2011, pp. 68–69). Activity undertaken by older people can fulfill many important functions in their lives, including adaptive, integrational, compensatory, educational, recreational, and entertainment functions (Dziegielewska, 2006, p. 164).

According to the principles of activity theory—one of the key theories explaining the regularities of human aging (Wawrzyniak, 2017b, p. 27)—people who remain active in late adulthood show a higher degree of satisfaction with their lives (Halicki, 2006, p. 262). Moreover, how seniors see themselves depends

> on the role they play or the activities they engage in. The elderly, in order to maintain a positive self-image, must replace the roles that they lost during the aging process with new ones. In this way, wellbeing in old age is the result of increasing activity in newly acquired roles. (Halicki, 2006, p. 262)

Activity theory lays the groundwork for the assumption that underlies various intervention programs for seniors: that activity in late adulthood is beneficial and leads to a boost in satisfaction with life (Halicki, 2006, p. 262). According to gerontological research, "people who lead an active lifestyle despite their old age have better mental health and live longer …, deal with failures better, and are less prone to the feelings of helplessness and loneliness" (Steuden, 2011, p. 90).

Activity is a significant psychological and social need in every phase of human life (Szatur-Jaworska, 2006a, p. 20). In old age,

a person … should undertake activity in accordance with their own needs and capabilities, as well as with the expectations and efforts of the people around them (activation)—and remaining active as long as possible is … necessary to achieve satisfaction. (Chabior, 2017a, p. 66)

The problem of seniors' free time in the context of activity theory

The activity of older people is largely connected with their free time. This concept is defined in various ways in the scientific literature. Bogusław Milerski and Bogusław Śliwerski state that free time is one of the basic concepts in social pedagogy, which defines "the scope and quality of a person's time available at their sole disposal; it is therefore the time that remains for free decisions after having performed all the necessary or mandatory tasks" (Milerski & Śliwerski, 2000, p. 38). Free time can be spent on rest (physical or mental), entertainment, social activities, developing one's interests, passions, or talents, or on self-improvement and self-education (Milerski & Śliwerski, 2000, p. 38).

An analysis of the above definition allows us to distinguish two main aspects of free time: quantitative and qualitative (Orłowska, 2007, p. 52). The former relates to the amount of free time available to us (free time is a specific part of the total budget of time[1]), while the latter relates to activities we perform in our free time (forms of using free time[2]), which are described as leisure or recreation (Zawadzka & Ferenz, 1998, pp. 9–10). This definition also indicates activities (or tasks) that do not fall into the category of free time (necessary and mandatory activities).[3]

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[1] The budget of time defines the "summary of time periods provided for various life activities" (Pięta, 2004, p. 18). One can talk about a daily and weekly time budget; it may also be considered over longer periods of time (Pięta, 2004, p. 18).

[2] The literature on the subject proposes various classifications of leisure activities (see Pięta, 2004; Napierała & Muszkieta, 2011). Due to "the complexity and richness of content, they can hardly be systematized and presented as uniform schemes and patterns" (Walczak, 1994, pp. 17–18).

[3] These include activities that are related to meeting one's biological and hygienic needs, as well as compulsory activities, such as studying, work, and family life (Przecławski, 1997, p. 75).

Leisure time activities are characterized by three basic features: voluntariness (they cannot be compulsory), not-profitability (they cannot be a primary source of income), and pleasure (Przecławski, 1997, pp. 75–76). The first of these features, which "indicates a free choice of behavior, consistent with one's expectations, needs, and interests" is particularly important (Denek, 2011, p. 90). This is of the essence from an educational point of view, because free time behaviors often manifest the real aspirations or attitudes of the individual (Przecławski, 1997, p. 76). As Ryszard Winiarski pointed out,

> when classifying activities that we categorize as recreation, we must remember that it is not the form, but a subjective assessment that determines their recreational nature. The same activity can be performed voluntarily and constitute a form of leisure, and at other times it may be compulsory and treated as work. (Winiarski, 2011, p. 16)

It is important, therefore, what significance a person attaches to the types/forms of activity done at specific moments of their life.

Free time can fulfill various functions in the life of an individual, e.g., education, care, and social (Denek, 2011, pp. 103–105). Aleksander Kamiński narrowed them down to three basic ones: rest, play, and working on oneself (1974, pp. 353–354). Rest means "recovering from physical fatigue and mental weariness in peace, silence, and contemplation" (Kamiński, 1974, p. 353). Play is the opposite of passive recreation; it "expresses the need for movement, novelty, adventure, gambling, various sensations, and illusions. It is a response to boredom and monotony …. It can be expressed in real activities (e.g., a trip) or a retreat into fiction (e.g., a film)" (Kamiński, 1974, p. 353). However, working on oneself signifies "the need for self-development in various forms of self-education (not only intellectual)" (Kamiński, 1974, p. 353). It refers to voluntary and independent acquisition of knowledge and skills in free time in order to improve oneself, i.e., the comprehensive development of one's personality" (Pięta, 2004, p. 52). From an educational point of view, it is important to maintain the right balance between the various functions of free time. None of these functions should dominate for a long time in the life of the individual (Orłowska, 2007, p. 64).

Significant changes in one's budget of time after retirement can be observed if one considers the general division of activities (during the day) into professional work, additional paid employment,

commuting, satisfying basic bodily needs, household chores, compulsory education, and leisure time activities. After applying this classification to the situation of senior citizens, the time budget usually looks as follows: time devoted to satisfying the basic needs of the body, time devoted to home and family responsibilities, and free time (Małecka, 1985, pp. 95–96). Leisure time is, therefore, an important component in the overall budget of time for seniors (Tokaj, 2000, p. 105).

Leisure time activity is a vital element of human life in its various phases. According to Lucjan Turos, the use of free time depends on the individual's health, well-being, development in various fields, and ability to adapt to changing social, cultural, and economic conditions (Turos, 1999, pp. 357–358). The role of a user of leisure is one of the most essential social roles of older people (Szatur-Jaworska, 2006b, p. 56). Based on their research, Małgorzata Halicka and Jerzy Halicki identified five types of activities that the elderly engage in in their free time: recreational and hobby activities (e.g., walking, gardening, or crafts), receptive activity (e.g., watching TV or reading newspapers and books), public-oriented activity (e.g., social or political activities), social activity (e.g., meeting friends or visiting senior clubs), and other types of activities (forms that do not fall within the above-mentioned types) (Halicka & Halicki, 2002, p. 207). Their research, as well as some studies and analyses carried out in subsequent years (Halicka & Halicki, 2002, p. 205; cf. Skibińska, 2006; Woszczyk, 2009; Brzezińska, 2011; Banach, 2013; Zwoliński, 2017), indicate the predominance of passive forms of recreation among Polish seniors.

Meanwhile, according to the principles of activity theory, thanks to an active lifestyle, an older person "feels needed, fulfilled, and satisfied and plans further action" (Wawrzyniak, 2017b, p. 28). Maintaining activity in one's senior years not only allows one to maintain good health and fitness, but is also an important stimulus to take responsibility for one's own life (Halicka & Kramkowska 2011, p. 42). However, the activity of an elderly person may depend on various factors. In the case of leisure time activity, the following factors should be considered as particularly relevant: biological (e.g., health), sociodemographic (e.g., gender), economic (e.g., financial situation), psychological (e.g., personality traits) (Winiarski, 1989, pp. 85–86) and

cultural (e.g., traditions) (Berbeka, Makówka, & Niemczyk, 2008, p. 25). These groups of factors certainly do not take into account all possibilities. The way older people use their free time also depends on whether they live alone, with their family (partner), or rely on care facilities (Zwoliński, 2017, p. 287). In this respect, much also depends on the previous experience of seniors (Kurek, 2008, p. 300). In the face of various obstacles to the activity of seniors, the problem of activating older people is particularly important. Since activity is so instrumental in the life of an older person, action should be taken to encourage activity and/or to facilitate an active life.

Activation is "intensifying and increasing activity, activating (becoming active)" (Górnikowska-Zwolak, 1999, p. 9). In the case of seniors, activation is "the process of creating opportunities and conditions for the elderly so that they can engage in many kinds of activity. It is related to the issue of social inclusion" (Kapralska, 2015, p. 246). Activation is associated with the belief that the activity of a particular group is insufficient and requires remedial action be taken (Kapralska, 2015, p. 246).

The main objectives of activating older people include, in particular, maintaining the physical fitness, good health, and independence of an elderly person; providing instruction and preparation to cooperate with others, to socialize in a group and in the neighborhood; enabling and expanding participation in society; maintaining or stimulating faith in the meaning of life; stimulating creative activity; and developing interests (Kozaczuk, 1995, pp. 25–26; Kurtyka-Chałas, 2014, p. 26; Chabior, 2017b, p. 65). Activation may concern various spheres of seniors' lives, e.g., physical, social, and intellectual (Ziomek-Michalak, 2014; Różański, 2017). It can be implemented in various

> forms whose selection depends mainly on individual human characteristics, such as age, education, place of residence, interests, mental health, and physical health—and on external factors: activation programs and the organizational and financial possibilities of people, institutions, and communities undertaking these activities. (Chabior, 2017b, p. 65)

In the activation process, it is important to take into account the individual characteristics of each person, such as their age, wellbeing, or personality traits (Gościniewicz & Szkurłat, 2015, p. 470). Agata Chabior adds to this list pragmatic knowledge (in the case of

seniors, it is the life experience gained over the years), professional and social competences, as well as passions and interests (Chabior, 2017a, p. 70); the latter are particularly vital from the point of view of leisure time activation. It is also important to properly recognize the needs of older people, their endeavors and desires, and the difficulties they experience.

Activation cannot be associated with forcing older people to be active (activation by force) (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2016, p. 94) or imposing various forms of activity. As Anna Leszczyńska-Rejchert states, "we must respect the preferences of the oldest generation, create the conditions for choice, and enable independent decisions to be made in this regard" (2016, p. 95). This is particularly important in the case of leisure time activity, i.e., that which is characterized by voluntariness and which is a source of pleasure, and often satisfaction as well. To a large extent,

> the subjective dimension of free time is testified by a person's experience of a sense of subjectivity in a given time interval, i.e., a sense of power to manage one's time (agency), fill it with highly valued content and forms (according to one's own preferences), and bear responsibility for one's actions and their consequences. (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2007, p. 224)

Activation (also leisure time activation) should therefore be directed primarily at empowering older people and encouraging them to take action for themselves and other people (Chabior, 2017b, p. 65). In the activation process, each person should be treated individually and subjectively (Kozaczuk, 1995, p. 26).

Final remarks

From the point of view of modern pedagogy, an important problem is both the withdrawal of older people from active life and the maintenance of activity in late adulthood. It seems especially relevant to identify whether and to what extent seniors' activity can be stimulated. For educators, activity theory—which says that "a condition for successful adaptation to old age is maintaining the current level of activity or replace its forms from previous periods [of life] with new ones "(Orzechowska, 2007, p. 176), is the starting point

for seeking ways to activate people in old age (Dziegielewska, 2006, pp. 163–164).

As already noted, the activity of older people is closely related to their free time, which performs many important functions in their lives. Leisure activities can be used not only for rest, play, or socializing, but also self-improvement. Free time—especially from a pedagogical perspective—should be considered a space for human development and self-fulfillment as well as a source of different threats (Nowocień, 2019, p. 31). For the elderly, it can be a space for developing various passions, searching for new hobbies, but sometimes also for inaction (Zrałek, 2014, p. 34), e.g., caused by health problems, financial difficulties, family problems, or a lack of specific skills, interest, or willingness to engage in activities. Hence, the issue of seniors' leisure time should be of interest to researchers, including representatives of the educational sciences and education practitioners. It seems particularly important to look for solutions that would support free time activation of older people and develop their skills to enhance the quality of life in the area of leisure (Toczek-Werner, Marak,& Wyrzykowski, 2018, p. 128). This corresponds strictly to the goals of social educators. As Astrid Tokaj states,

> all actions rooted in social pedagogy in the theory, research, and finally practice of the last phase of human life are (or should be) subordinated to achieving one fundamental goal in particular, which is improving the quality of life of seniors in old age, experienced in both the individual and the social dimensions. Thus, the main task of social pedagogy in this context is to create the most optimal existential and development conditions, adapted to the actual functional/physical, psychosocial, and financial capabilities of older people.… The implementation of this task is inseparably connected with raising the life competences of older people. (Tokaj, 2008, pp. 230–231)

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