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My Body and My Identity. The Identity Dilemmas of Contemporary Elderly Women

ABSTRACT

Human identity is one of the key issues of a successful existence. It is not possible to avoid answering such questions as: Who am I? How do I understand myself? What do I identify myself with? Those questions demand answers, which are being continuously verified because of the changing individual, social and cultural conditions. Nowadays, one of the main features of reality is a very strong concentration on human body, its appearance, physical attractiveness, and compatibility with socially promoted ideals. The socially popularized model is a young, beautiful, charming and fit body. This is especially true for the body of a woman – a representative of the fair sex. Meeting those social expectations is not an easy task. It requires a lot of effort and sacrifice. While it is not a problem for younger women, it is very difficult and problematic for elderly women.

In this article, the selected identity dilemmas experienced by nowadays elderly women will be discussed based on the available research described in Polish and foreign literature. As a result of the aging process of the body, the elderly woman's body is far from the socially promoted ideal of the female body. This situation affects the self-esteem of elderly women and forces them to redefine themselves and their identity. The studies conducted so far have shown that the elderly women adopt various strategies in order to deal with these dilemmas. This article, *inter alia*, will discuss those strategies.

Keywords:

body, physical attractiveness, identity dilemmas, elderly women, somatic society

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of identity can be examined on many levels. We can talk about individual and collective identity, national, ethnic, socio-cultural or religious identity. The typology of the phenomenon is complex and it is not easy to define it. At the root of the deliberations on identity lies the conviction that it is a constant, internal structure that every being possesses, and that distinguishes it from others, points to its uniqueness. Anthony Giddens explains that, “identity refers to the fact how people understand themselves and what has meaning for them. [...] The most important sources of identity are gender, sexual orientation, nationality or ethnicity, and social class” (Giddens, 2012, p. 52).

Although the identity issue has been present in a social thought for ages, the term identity, as an encyclopedic guide states, “entered widespread use in the last decades of the twentieth century, becoming one of the central categories of both social sciences and colloquial language” (Socjologia. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny, 2008, p. 226). Jerzy Nikitorowicz claims that certain phenomena, such as identity, “are not perceived and analyzed when they are not causing trouble. They are noticed, given value and focused on when they lose their brightness, get lost in multidimensionality and ambiguity” (Nikitorowicz, 2006, p. 309). The author’s reflection perfectly describes today’s reality. Nowadays we could observe a unique intensification of existential questions, such as: Who am I? Where am I from? Where am I heading?

“Having a specific identity is an elementary need of every individual and a necessary condition for the existence of a social group” (Socjologia. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny, 2008, p. 226). But nowadays this need or condition is not easily met. We live in a reality that “offers us an unprecedented range of possibilities for creating ourselves and building our identity” (Giddens, 2012, p. 53). According to Zygmunt Bauman, “postmodern times are the era of specialists of identity problems, personality healers” (Bauman, 2000, p. 307). Different values are offered to us, and the choice is in our hands. We are forced to find ourselves constantly (Giddens, 2012, p. 53). Moreover, today’s human has problems not only with their individual identity, but also with the socio-cultural identity. The number of elements that bind members of a group decreases. Collective identity, that is “self-recognition as a member of a particular social group” (Socjologia. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny, 2008, p. 226), a similar way of understanding, feeling, similar reactions and actions for all living in a community, are becoming more and more fluid. This dynamism causes the chaos which is experienced by a modern human. What was in the past considered as an unquestionable indicator of affiliation to a group, is no longer such a certainty.

Elderly people are particularly at risk of experiencing identity crisis as they are individuals living on the border of different social worlds. They are witnesses of “the transition from pre-industrial to industrial and post-industrial society, from »tradition-oriented« to »internally-controlled« and »externally controlled« society, [...] from »the world of fate« to »the world of choice«” (Bugajska, 2005, p. 55). This variability of reality is “a real identity challenge, requiring constant attention when choosing and constructing one’s own identity” (Ziętek, 2008, p. 11). It is assumed that “the generation of elderly people, called »the stainless generation«, has a strong identity base, rooted in experiences of their own biography, often related to the trauma of war” (Bugajska, 2005, p. 59). However, “the modern world does not resemble the world from decades ago. The well-known ways of »settling in the world« have lost their relevance, which makes it even more difficult for an older people to be themselves and get used to living in a new world” (Bugajska, 2005, p. 59). The specific nature of the Polish situation makes these issues even more complicated. Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński (1996) draws attention to the coexistence of civilizational transformations and those connected with the system transformation. The collapse of the old system caused a certain type of identity crisis among individuals and social groups that defined their identity in relation to the previous system. The hierarchy of values has changed, the existing rituals, habits and patterns of behavior have lost (or are losing) their power, and “the complexity of the new reality in which everyone is forced to determine their place in the society has placed the elderly in a very difficult situation. The collective interpretation of the place of a person in society has lost its former usefulness, because the older generation acts according to the habits shaped in the conditions of the institutional system that no longer exists” (Bugajska, 2005, p. 60). In such circumstances, it is easy to get lost.

A. Giddens points out that one of the main sources of human identity is sex. Biological sex is the anatomical and physiological difference between a woman’s body and a man’s body; it is the biological distinction between a male and a female. So, when we are talking about biological sex, we mean the body of a person. On the other hand, gender is the psychological, social and cultural difference between men and women. “Gender relates to the social development of the concept of masculinity and femininity” (Giddens, 2012, p. 128). These socially constructed attitudes, usually organized in a dichotomous way as masculinity and femininity, are the behaviors that we expect from men and women. In determining an individual’s identity, both sex and gender are certainly important. The considerations presented in this text will address the issue of gender.

Based on the available literature of the subject – Polish and foreign – selected identity dilemmas of contemporary seniors will be discussed in this article.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) classification, seniors are defined as people aged 60 and over (cf. Kramkowska, 2016a, pp. 20–28). Taking into consideration the contemporary body-centered ideology (body-oriented culture), there will be discussed selected difficulties experienced by a modern woman over 60 while defining herself in the somatic reality.

IDEAL FEMALE BODY OVER THE CENTURIES

Women are often called *fair sex*, as “beauty is one of the main planes of social creation and maintenance of gender difference” (Melosik, 2010, p. 22). This seemingly innocent expression describing women entails many consequences. What it means to be fully a woman is to be a beautiful woman with a beautiful body and attractive appearance which meets the social norms and values. This requires women to work relentlessly and make numerous sacrifices. The ideal of the female body has evolved throughout the ages.

Proportion and symmetric shapes were admired in the middle ages. Polykleitos wrote: “Beauty consists in the proportions not of the elements, but of the parts of finger to finger, and of all the fingers to the palm and the wrist, and of these to the forearm to the upper arm, and of all the other parts to each other” (Harris & Zucker, 2015). In ancient Egypt, a beautiful woman was a woman who had symmetrical facial features, high waist line and slim shoulders. Besides that, a woman had to have long hair and eyes with strong highlight. On the other hand, ancient Greece culture was focused mainly on male bodies, whereas female body was treated as “a deformity”, as Aristotle stated. Nevertheless, the woman’s ideal body type also appeared in Greece. It was a full-figured woman, quite plump with long hair and fair complexion.

In the Medieval Period, the spread of Christianity resulted in a radical change of the attitude to the body. It was taught that body was the prison of soul and a man should fight with it through mortification and asceticism (Lach, 2011, p. 14). Christianity set a new ideal of a human body, which was the ideal of a saint who fasted and was ready to sacrifice and become a martyr. Such an ideology influenced the way the woman’s body was perceived. Church fathers interpreted the description of the creation of the world and man, and stated that women are inferior to men, because they were made from Adam’s rib. Therefore, a beautiful woman was the one who was modest and subjugated, slim (obesity was seen as proof of publicly denounced gluttony), breastless and hipless, and dressed in attire covering them from top to toe (Mazurkiewicz, 2013, p. 242).

The body which, nowadays, would be called obese, in the Renaissance and Baroque was considered normal. Wide hips, oval stomach, very big breasts and massive shoulders were desirable in those times and were invaluable elements of the feminine beauty ideal. Ruben's women's body shape was complemented by pale complexion with a slight pink tinge and fine curls (Bieńko, 2015, p. 25). The following centuries brought new ideas of a perfect body, including woman's body. The 19th century was the time of organicism, in which human body was an organic machine, i.e. a part of production. The aim was to make the body as productive as it was possible. One of the means of achieving that was discipline, which was supposed to increase body's capacities and efficiency. In organicism, woman's body main function was to give birth to healthy offspring, preferably male one (Lach, 2011, pp. 18–19).

The 1920s revolutionized the understanding of female beauty. After the Great War, women fought for suffrage, stopped wearing ball gowns, cut their hair and often took up a job – as they wanted to match men. The role model was a confident, distinguished, slim woman with somewhat male body. Narrow shoulders and small bust matched the fashion then – plain, loose dresses with a drop waist were usually worn.

Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe were the feminine beauty ideal from the 1950s. They promoted the female curvy body by wearing clothes showing off their bust and shoulders. They highlighted their slim waist, full hips, and they also popularised the hourglass shape. After the feminine 1950s, there came a decade which stood in complete opposition to 50s. Instead of a curvy female body, a skinny, boyish shaped woman figure started to be desirable. The hips were supposed to be narrow, legs long and thin, and the bust was to be preferably small and invisible. The make-up underlined smooth, porcelain complexion and strongly highlighted eyes.

The ideal woman in the 1980s was supposed to be slim, but not skinny. She was to be healthy and fit. The ideal female body had to have sculpted shoulders and muscular body. The craze for healthy, slim body was also present in the 1990s, but instead of a muscular and attractive figure, the ideal was a skinny, almost anorexic body. Athletic models from the 1980s were replaced with their extremely thin friends. Protruding hip bones, collarbones, a perfect flat belly and very thin legs became fashionable. “The feminine beauty ideal of a contemporary woman, a woman of the 21st century, consists of slenderness, slimness, tallness as well as youthful appearance and light muscularity” (Banaszak & Florkowski, 2010, p. 54). The slim body should be gained through physical exercise and a healthy diet. She should have a flat belly, big bust and firm buttocks.

Although a woman has always been identified through her body, and its size and shape should match the social standards, contemporary focus on the body and its appearance is extremely strong. Nowadays, body is treated instrumentally, as a created reflection of one's identity and a project of oneself. "All of it concerns especially female body, which, to a larger extent than the male one, participates in the »image game« in the media" (Majka-Roster, 2010, p. 193). This fact is also true for older women.

A SOMATIC SOCIETY – CONTEMPORARY FOCUS ON THE BODY

In sociological literature, more precisely in the publications from the sociology of the body, we find out that modern societies can be called somatic societies (Greek soma – body, organism). This phrase was coined by Bryan S. Turner (1984), who, while observing the British society, concluded that the majority of political, social or personal problems were focused and expressed through the body. The body was also the centre, it became the main area of scientific, political, and cultural activities. Hence, Turner introduced the term "somatic society". After the year 2000, that is when people had got accustomed to the new reality started with the political transformation in 1989, Polish scientists also began writing about the trend described by Turner. Most of them were sociologists, such as Z. Bauman (1995, 2000), A. Buczkowski (2005), M. Szczepański (et al., 2008), H. Jakubowska (2009, 2013), or Z. Melosik (2010). Nowadays, the transformations characteristic for a somatic society are more noticeable in Poland than they were 15 years ago. Marek Szczepański even states that the contemporary culture is the body-centred culture, "in which a human defines themselves and gains self-awareness through the body, creates their identity through the body, and even his understanding of the world happens through the body" (Szczepański et al., 2008, p. 56). A similar view is expressed by Zbyszko Melosik, who believes that a human's identity is more and more often defined relating to the body. In his opinion, "identity is gradually being washed away from the brain or soul and transferred onto »surface« – it starts to be expressed through the body. [...] A human creates his identity through building a visual image of their body" (Melosik, 2010, pp. 18–19).

The rightness of the authors' insight can be easily noticed if we observe the reality or analyse the content in the media. The body is the focal point. Moreover, it is not enough to have "any" body. Today, the socially desirable model is a beautiful body, an attractive body, decorated or styled. Chris Shilling (2003) believes that the popular understanding of the body as a project, the shape and form of

which depends on the owner, results in many people trying to match the socially promoted body ideals. It is much easier for younger people to conform to social soma requirements, however, for older people it is not as easy. It is particularly challenging for older women.

IDENTITY DILEMMAS OF A CONTEMPORARY FEMALE SENIOR

Old age is often perceived in a negative way. Our society values youth and its attributes, such as strength, vitality and an attractive appearance. Consequently, it means that in such a society nobody wants to be old, because old age is the opposite of youth. Old age, more precisely old body, which always betrays person's age group, for many people might become like a Nessus shirt, as M. Szczepański metaphorically said. The author explains, "The mythical Nessus – a centaur in love with Deianeira – gave her a poisoned, »burning « shirt, which was to guarantee Heracles' faithfulness. The poison in the shirt made Heracles' skin burn every time he wanted to remove it" (Szczepański, 2008, p. 57). The interpretation of this metaphor, Szczepański explains, is that human body might be in the social context such a shirt, a mark which people want to get rid of, to offload it (Szczepański, 2008, p. 57). This metaphor is particularly adequate to an old person's body. Seniors might want to get rid of their body because it annoys them, it is full of pain, but also because it is different from their young body of the past. It could be more humped, more wrinkled, or ill. Physiological changes happening in the body because of aging make them a different person. Existential questions, such as: who am I now? how should I define myself? how to get used to the new reality? – become vital and demand an answer. The case of an old woman is the best example of this dilemma.

In Polish literature on this subject there are few publications discussing the issue of old person's body, which are a result of research conducted amongst senior women. If such research is carried out, the initiators are usually psychologists using a standardised tool like Body Esteem Scale (BES) to analyse the attitude of the people to their body. The scale refers to the body attractiveness, its weight, and physical condition. The research conducted by Natalia Mazurkiewicz (2013) amongst 42 women aged 55–83 showed that they had a negative image of their body which was deteriorating with age. The older the woman was, the more displeased she was with the weight, attractiveness, or physical activity. On the other hand, Dorota Niewiedział, who also used BES, carried out research amongst 134 widows aged 61–78. Her findings showed that the opinion about the attractiveness

of a body among ageing women was varied. “The interviewed widows have quite a positive opinion about their body in terms of sexual attractiveness, however, they are not satisfied with their weight and fitness. The respondents rated highest their lips, ears, eye shape, face, cheek bones, and sexual drive in terms of sexual attractiveness. The lowest opinions were about chin and the bust. [...] The fitness findings show that the widows, *despite a lowered general level of satisfaction on this scale*, are generally satisfied with their health, motor coordination, muscle strength, and agility. They are least content with their reflexes and biceps. The weight satisfaction results show (*taking into consideration the lowered general satisfaction*) that respondents are most satisfied with their waist shape and overall figure, whereas they are dissatisfied with their appetite and the look of their thighs” (Niewiedział, 2014, p. 273). Alicja Głębocka, a psychologist as well, used her own tools (i.e., Body Image Questionnaire [KWCO], Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety Scale) to conduct research in a group of 264 women aged 20–86, 87 of whom were 60 years or over. The research findings showed that “the level of satisfaction with the appearance and the body amongst older women is lower than in younger women. Older women were particularly displeased with their hair, eyes, neck and height, so the things which change with age” (Głębocka, 2016, p. 12). Despite those facts, the interviewed seniors did not want to have any plastic surgeries or any other specialist treatment which could make their body look better. The author explains that such an attitude, which is quite common amongst the post-war generation, is a result of the belief that plastic surgeries do not work when people are old (Głębocka, 2016, p. 13).

Katarzyna Pawlikowska and Dominika Maison (2014) obtained comparable results while conducting quantitative research on a sample of 600 women aged 17–90, 10% of whom were women aged 60 and over. In all the analysed aspects of the body (i.e., satisfaction with one’s beauty, appearance, acceptance of one’s body), the least positive answers were given by the oldest respondents. The free-form interviews conducted by Patrycja Woszczyk in a group of 24 women aged 65 and over showed that although most respondents believed that women over the age of 65 could be perceived as attractive and arouse interest from both younger and older men, “but almost a half of them (10/24) stated that they did not feel attractive because of the old age. Others had difficulty answering this question” (Woszczyk, 2009, p. 195). The interviewed women also said, “the body deformity makes it feel alien, because it does not let us do whatever we would want to, and the body changes are baffling” (Woszczyk, 2009, p. 200). Hence, it is not surprising that older women might experience identity dilemmas. The value of a female is mostly determined by her body, by her pretty appearance. Women are expected to go to

great lengths to keep their attractive look. After all, they are the fair sex. That is why women identify themselves with their body, “they are their appearance”. On the one hand, it boosts their confidence, but, on the other hand, women have no choice, if they want to be socially accepted, they must be beautiful and must take care of their body (Buczowski, 2005, p. 285). Older women lose the thing that determines their femininity, and their body seems alien and unattractive, and consequently their self-esteem suffers. Some nagging questions appear: Who am I? How to get used to the new situation? What constitutes my place in the society?

The research on the same issue in foreign literature has led to similar conclusions. Kathleen F. Slevin interviewed 57 people aged 60–89 (31 women and 26 men). The interviews were about various aspects of ageing and the body in old age. The findings of the study showed the interviewed people were generally happy with their retired life, but when it came to the body, the satisfaction disappeared. They spoke in a negative way about their body explaining that they lived in a world worshipping youth whereas their body was old. Their statements clearly implied that their ageing body was unattractive. Although they understood that old age was a completely different world with its own rules and it was natural that they look older, yet still, they did not agree with it (Slevin, 2010).

Laura H. Clarke (2001) arrived at a bit different conclusion having interviewed 22 women aged 61–92. Her study confirmed that appearance/physical attractiveness were crucial elements building a women’s identity. What was dissimilar from the other studies was the fact the respondents said they felt young but their body was telling them something else. The body told them they were old although they did not feel as old as they were. Moreover, their ageing body influenced how they were perceived in the society. The women experienced disparity between their definition of themselves and their true age as well as the appearance of their body. Clarke concluded that the interviewed women internalized the devaluation of old women in the world focused on beauty and youth. Since their old body indicates their old age, and everything that is old is not beautiful, unattractive or not fitting the reality, women perceive themselves in a negative way, as someone who does not fit in the society. However, a different approach to this identity dilemma might also be taken.

The research by P. Woszczyk has proven that today’s female body beauty canon affects the way of thinking about the determinants of an attractive body of an old woman. The women who participated in the study said that an attractive female senior should be slim, “have a straight figure, a face with few wrinkles, well-cared-for body and hair, and properly chosen clothes” (Woszczyk, 2009, p. 198). It is clearly noticeable that many female seniors try to match this body

type ideal although it is not easy. Physiological processes make it difficult to reach the socially promoted body type ideals, but elderly women still try to do that.

K. Slevin indicated that for the interviewed seniors *clue* of their age was their clothing. Her interlocutors were interested in fashion, because they wanted to look young, and they wanted to fit in the society also in this respect. They said that they should not wear clothes which would make them look old or such clothes that would give their age away (Slevin, 2010). Julia Twigg, a sociologist from the University of Kent who has been researching the issue of old people's body for a long time, carried out a few research projects on the relations between a senior's age and their body understood as attracting attention appearance, which means, i.a., well-cared-for skin, hairstyle and dress. The author believes that in every society there is a dress code which should be followed. This code also applies for the seniors. Old people should not wear garish, too colourful or brave clothes. That is why seniors' closet is usually full of subdued, or even sad colours, such as grey, black or white. J. Twigg concluded that social clothing norms for old people make them invisible and lead to their marginalisation (Twigg, 2007). The following years and her further studies have resulted in a slight modification of her conclusions. The author writes that in consumer culture clothes are a way of expressing yourself and your identity. They are very important – especially for women. It is also true for female seniors. The studies carried out by Twigg (2013) show that British seniors, and particularly female seniors, are more and more interested in fashion. They want to look young, so they wear fashionable and colourful clothes. The style of clothes focused on the youth spread onto the old. Seniors are rebelling against the conventions. When an old woman dresses in a way that is socially not suitable for her or when she tries to rejuvenate her body, she might have to face the social norms associated with age. Yet, it is a way of expressing herself, expressing how she feels, how she defines herself. It is a method of showing that she does not want to be socially invisible, that she feels like a full member of the society, and that there is a place for her in it. Such an attitude of seniors might be a sign of their awareness that wisdom and experience as a social capital of an old person have little value nowadays. Hence, they undertake new actions to define themselves, to find a new place in the society (cf. Kramkowska, 2016b). J. Nikitorowicz writes that “identity is a creative effort, which cannot not be made, left aside, postponed or replaced” (Nikitorowicz, 2006, p. 310). It seems that modern seniors are making this effort. It is likely that women trying to stop the time and stay attractive do it to answer the question “who am I?” with: “I’m a well-cared-for old lady, fitting in the society”.

CONCLUSIONS

The human identity is a very individual matter. Each of us is looking for a definition of himself, and when we create it, we are modifying the definition as a result of various life experiences. So talking about the identity of different social groups, e.g., identity of elderly women, refers to certain observable phenomena that in some extent express specific tendencies which for some people are true, and for others – not. However, the analysis of identity dilemmas makes sense, because the reflection on this what is not entirely clear or well investigated prompts us to ask different questions that will be answered sooner or later.

According to the literatures which were quoted in this article, the social reception of an aging senior's body is negative, which is especially difficult for elderly women. They are the fine sex, but their body has little in common with the promoted nowadays models of female beauty. Physical attractiveness is crucial for women in creation of their identity. Hence, it is not surprising that elderly women experience various dilemmas connected with this issue. The research results quoted in this paper indicate that female seniors' self-esteem as well as their understanding of their role in the somatic society are changing because of individual factors (e.g., changing body) as well as social ones (body-oriented culture). As only few studies have been conducted into this matter, it is impossible to state in which direction the changes are going. This subject needs further research. Agata Dziuban writes: "The cult of a young and attractive body, which is promoted in the media, affects our social attitudes towards old age and the importance of it. The body, with its huge role in creating social identity, makes old age determinants, such as wisdom, autobiographical capability, experience or knowledge about life, mean less and less in defining old age. The proof of that might be the fact that the changes happening to an aging body are often shown as dysfunction" (Dziuban, 2013, p. 16). It is obvious that in Polish society, which is an aging as well as somatic society, the role of an old person should be redefined. It is no longer certain that seniors' wisdom, life experience or knowledge guarantee their social respect. This hypothesis needs verification. If this what formerly designated the seniors' position in society does not apply today, we have to ask what nowadays would guarantee their social respect? Succumbing to the modern focus on the body is unfair as it *a priori* puts seniors in a losing position.

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