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The Taboo of Senior Sexuality as a Challenge to Contemporary Geragogy

Attentive consideration discovers to me four pretexts, for supposing age to be unhappy:

1. That it withdraws us from the business of life.
2. That it enfeebles the body.
3. That --it takes away nearly all our pleasures.
4. That it verges upon Death.

Cicero, *Cato the Elder: or, A Treatise on Old Age*

Societies age, and according to demographers, the phenomenon will gradually intensify. In Poland, there are currently about 4.7 million 60+ women and 2 million 65+ men; the Central Statistical Office estimates that by 2030 the number will increase to 9.6 million persons, with more than twice as many elderly women as men¹. In response, science has been increasingly interested in the quality of life of seniors. 2012 was even determined as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations².

Considering the above background, it is not surprising that we have been witnessing a strong development of geragogy, i.e. pedagogy of older people, which supports processes adapting one to old age³, and “analyses the last stage of development of human life, diagnosing the life situation of the elderly, and identifying the main factors determining the process of ageing. It explores the possibilities for prolonging and optimising conditions of active life of people who are outside working age”⁴. Its main tasks include, inter alia, preparation for old age, prevention of pathologies in the autumn of life, guidance and counselling for seniors, their activation, as well as preparation for suffering and death⁵. However, “in the social

¹ http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/5840_648_PLK_HTML.htm, accessed on: 06.06.2012.

² Information on the European year 2012 – European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, <http://europa.eu/ey2012/ey2012main.jsp?langId=pl&catId=971>, accessed on: 02.06.2012.

³ Adaptive processes are affected by two groups of factors: internal (emotions, motivations, expectations) and external ones (manifesting, inter alia, in other people's actions such as their treatment of the elderly), see Z. Szarota, *Gerontologia społeczna i oświatowa. Zarys problematyki* [Social and Educational Gerontology. an Outline of Issues], Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii im. A. Frycza Modrzewskiego, Kraków 2004, p. 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

sciences, issues related to old age continue to be neglected”⁶. It is true that there is a growing number of scientific publications on the subject, but we still lack works which are complementary, ones that would grasp the situation of an elderly person comprehensively, without shying away from such difficult topics as sexuality.

It should also be pointed out that there are several different theories of ageing in the context of social gerontology, to which geragogy is classified, i.e. the theory of deficit, the theory of activity, and the competence theory⁷. The first one is based on the belief that over time, older people function gradually worse and worse – in the physical, mental, and social areas. Their bodies become increasingly susceptible to various diseases, their social activity diminishes, and their intelligence as well as adaptive abilities decrease, making them gradually more and more dependent on the external environment (family, doctors, therapists, caregivers). When this theory dominated, the need for senior education was far from being recognised, as the area was considered pointless and doomed to failure. The theory comprises the theory of defect, and the theory of limited use. Basically, the difference between these boils down to whether seniors are considered as persons having no impact on their fate and entirely subject to external influences, or persons who can prolong their youth owing to individual activity. However, both theoretical orientations accept the category of loss and at best maintain that it is possible to postpone the gradual negative changes, but fail to mention the developmental potential of the autumn of life. This potential was only recognized by the theory of activity and the competence theory. Senior activity is not only possible, but also recommended. According to many researchers, activities replacing work after retirement, hobbies, and social life boost wellbeing⁸. Education is to largely help seniors undertake their new role in life. In turn, the competence theory assumes that the activity “should not focus solely on recreation. Education helps seniors to maintain their independence, and object to stereotypes and ignorance in the area of gerontological issues”⁹. The social capital of seniors is increasingly recognised and they are increasingly encouraged to pursue educational effort, accentuating that, being a senior, one can still develop oneself and extend the area of his/her independence, which has a considerable influence on the quality of life¹⁰. This theory is founded on the belief that “behaviour at an elderly age, just like in every other part of biography, must be understood as a relationship between the require-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ J. Halicki, *Edukacja seniorów w aspekcie teorii kompetencyjnej. Studium historyczno-porównawcze* [Senior Education in the Aspect of Competence Theory. A Historical and Comparative Study], Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie, Białystok 2000, pp. 9–13; Z. Szarota, *op. cit.*, pp. 46–47.

⁸ B. Ziębińska, *Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku jako instytucje przeciwdziałające marginalizacji osób starszych* [Universities of the Third Age as Institutions Countering the Marginalisation of the Elderly], a doctoral thesis written under the supervision of prof. zw. dr. hab. Janusz Sztumski, Katowice 2007, pp. 77–79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰ Obviously, the promotion of this model of perception of old age is also politically justified – since if the process of the ageing of societies cannot be stopped, then at least the seniors’ social capital should be used effectively, as it can constitute a non-economic factor behind the development of national economies.

ments to be met by people and the resources enabling their satisfaction"¹¹, which testifies to its individualistic approach. This is because every stage of life is marked by different developmental tasks¹², and, besides, the demands of the continually changing reality alter, varying along the expectations we pose to the particular age groups, including the seniors. The competence theory therefore places emphasis on the development of senior competences in the physical, cognitive, and social dimensions, which can be jointly referred to as "one's ability to take responsibility for one's life and its independent shaping"¹³. The theory focuses on the development of seniors' creative attitude, affirmation of life and the implementation of autotelic values. Also, according to life-span developmental psychology, "the human being develops unbrokenly at every stage of their life and takes on specific tasks. The same is true about the sexual development in an elderly age"¹⁴.

The way in which older people cope with these developmental tasks is affected by their own and the younger generations' attitude to themselves. In relation to the autumn of life, seniors most often display attitudes marked by:

- constructiveness,
- dependence,
- defence,
- hostility,
- self-destruction¹⁵.

The above typology shows the possible responses to our own old age, ranging from the most desirable one, i.e. constructive, to the most harmful, self-destructive attitude. They depend on the particular senior's personality, life experience, support or absence of support from the people who are close to them, social attitude to old age, and many other factors.

The development of negative attitudes in seniors is hugely influenced by the beliefs of the younger generation – and these are rather unclear. A US study from the 1980s showed that young people have 3 positive beliefs about seniors and 8 negative ones. The former include the image of a "model grandpa, a sage, and a liberal family head". The latter reflect the image of a "weak, helpless, lonely, socially uninvolved person, an unbearable neighbour, a disheartened beggar and vagabond, someone

¹¹ J. Halicki, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹² Many of these tasks concern the attitude to oneself as an ageing person, including the satisfaction of the need to belong to a given age group, acceptance of changes to one's body and the worsening of health, preparation for the death of the partner, etc., see E. Kasperek-Golimowska, *Starość w perspektywie edukacji promującej zdrowie* [Old Age in the Perspective of Education Promoting Health], [in:] *Starość w perspektywie studiów pedagogicznych* [Old Age in the Perspective of Pedagogical Studies], A. Tokaj (ed.), *Studia i Monografie Wyższej Szkoły Humanistycznej im. Króla Stanisława Leszczyńskiego w Lesznie*, Leszno 2008, p. 35.

¹³ J. Halicki, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ M. Cichocka, *Biopsychosocjalne uwarunkowania seksualności ludzi starych* [Biopsychosocial Determinants of Senior Sexuality], [in:] *Seksualność w cyklu życia człowieka* [Sexuality in Human Life-Cycle], M. Beisert (ed.), PWN, Warszawa 2006, p. 216.

¹⁵ Z. Szarota, *op. cit.*, p. 48, and A. Kowgier, *Życie intymno-emocjonalne osób starszych* [Intimate and Emotional Life of the Elderly], Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls", Kraków 2010, p. 78.

who is malicious, a miser, a curmudgeon, and a sourpuss"¹⁶. In Poland, Agata Kowgier carried out a study which was mainly aimed at checking students' opinions on the intimate and emotional life of older people. Its results show inter alia that:

- the majority of the students participating in the study had negative associations with old age¹⁷;
- the majority of respondents believed that women cease to be sexually active between the ages of 56–60, and men after the 66th year of age¹⁸;
- responsibility for the cessation of the seniors' sexual activity lies equally with psychological (44% of answers), and physiological factors (43% of answers), while only 19% of respondents believed that it is related to social factors¹⁹;
- almost a half of the respondents believed that being a sexually active senior increases the level of satisfaction with life²⁰.

Geragogues should draw important conclusions from the research results: in particular that it is necessary to deliver a positive image of old age so that young people associate it in a less negative way. At the same time, it is necessary to remember that the young people's perception of a relationship between the sexual activity of seniors and the level of their satisfaction with life constitutes a good foundation for educational activity in this scope, including in particular fighting against stereotypes.

The notion of stereotypes and myths is extremely important in the context of the subject of my work. Many of them have arisen around the sexual life of seniors, strengthening its being made a taboo area and promoting ageism²¹. It even results from M. Grabowska's research that sexual life is negatively affected not only by stereotypes concerning old age, but also, in the case of women, those applying to their gender²². In turn, R. Bartel specified the myth of old people's asexuality among the seven main myths concerning ageing and old age²³, while Agnieszka and Artur Fabiś identified the following most popular myths related to the sexual activity of seniors:

- "people who are older and diseased are not interested in sex;
- older and diseased people after 60 should adjust to living a celibate life;
- older people who think of sex are infantile;
- masturbation in the elderly is unhealthy;

¹⁶ A. Kowgier, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

²¹ This notion "describes [...] negative stereotypical social attitudes to older people. The negative attitude is reflected in the way they are treated by individuals, institutions, in language, media, and jokes [...]", following J. Janiszewska-Rain, *Okres późnej dorosłości. Jak rozpoznać potencjał ludzi w wieku podeszłym* [The Period of Late Adulthood. How to Recognise the Potential of Old People], [in:] *Psychologiczne portrety człowieka. Praktyczna psychologia rozwojowa* [Psychological Portraits of People. A Practical Developmental Psychology], A.I. Brzezińska (ed.), GWP, Gdańsk 2005, p. 612.

²² M. Grabowska, *Seksualność we wczesnej, średniej i późnej dorosłości. Wybrane uwarunkowania* [Sexuality in the Early, Middle and Late Adulthood. Selected Determinants], Wyd. UKW, Bydgoszcz 2011, pp. 229–237.

²³ Z. Szarota, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

- men after 60 are impotent;
- in women, sexual desire ends with the menopause;
- women after 60 do not experience orgasms;
- sexual abstinence after 60 promotes good health;
- older people practice only vaginal contact;
- sexually active people after 60 are immoral²⁴.

The existence of these myths illustrates the fact that there are still many people who are not aware of or ignore the achievements of modern medicine, owing to which, already for a long time, one has been able to relatively easily solve various sexual problems of a biological nature. It is much more difficult to change the picture of senior sexuality in the social reception. Unfortunately, it still tends to be assessed in aesthetic and ethical terms and is heavily criticised. This is due to the persistent perception, especially in the Catholic societies, of sex primarily as a means of procreation²⁵, and also due to the very strong contemporary cult of youth and the body²⁶.

An old body can be perceived as “a factory of disgust, a source of misery and odiousness, distress and anguish”²⁷ – after all, “whatever is young is beautiful, and whatever is old – according to the common way of thinking and speaking – is ugly”²⁸. This is particularly visible in the case of women, in relation to whom the pressure to have a young, beautiful body is the strongest²⁹. As was pointed out by B. Bartosz and E. Zierkiewicz: “As much as older men are perceived as ones

²⁴ A. and A. Fabiś, *Aktywność seksualna osób starszych* [Sexual Activity of Older People], [in:] *Tabu seksuologii. Wątpliwości, trudne tematy, dylematy w seksuologii i edukacji seksualnej* [Taboo of Sexology. Doubts, Difficult Topics, Dilemmas in Sexology and Sexual Education], A. Jodko (ed.), Wyd. Academica, Warszawa 2008, p. 158.

²⁵ K. Imieliński even talks about the ideology of reproduction, which together with the ideology of vaginal sex add to the negative image of senior sexuality and for this reason should be overthrown; see A. Kowgier, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–103.

²⁶ “Another form of the contemporary consumerism created by fashion and media market is the culture of superficiality. On the human scale, Lasch (1978) describes it as a culture of smooth body, civilisation of depilation, plastic surgeries, massage, beauty parlours, gyms and cosmetics which capture and reflect the light, i.e. technologies persistently smoothing and polishing the human body narcissistically focused on itself. According to Bauman (1991), economic, social and cultural instability of modern societies is responsible for the disappearance of the traditional bases of social identity, with the exception to the bond with human body understood as the only permanent factor of the changing identity. Hence, in modern culture the current position of the cult of the body supported with the cult of youth and ‘superficiality’ as a high value of the current consumer society. Jogging, diet, slimming, cosmetic treatments which beautify and correct beauty, prolong the youth, preserve one’s health and offer longevity are perceived as manifestations of freedom and an important factor of social, sexual and professional attractiveness of people. The ‘culture of superficiality’ is exemplified by the dynamic, dramatic increase in the services designed to cater for the value of human life in the form of beauty, health, and youth”. K. Rembowska, *Kulturowy aspekt przemian rynku usług* [The Cultural Aspect of Transformations on the Services Market], <http://www.sse.geo.uni.lodz.pl/uploads/space8/rembowska.pdf>, accessed on 10.06.2012.

²⁷ M. Rusiecki, *Etyczno-religijne aspekty starszego wieku* [Ethical and Religious Aspects of Old Age], [in:] *Demograficzne i indywidualne starzenie się* [Demographic and Individual Ageing], A. Zych (ed.), Wyd. Akademii Świętokrzyskiej, Kielce 2001, pp. 65–66.

²⁸ A. Kowgier, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁹ See M. Grabowska, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

‘in their prime’, an older woman is typically not only described as a ‘granny’ or ‘an old woman’, but also treated in this way, i.e. with tolerance, leniency, etc. [...] ‘Clinging to youth’ is considered a social necessity – it is sanctioned by media and observed by women themselves”³⁰. For this reason the said cult of the body, youth and beauty can have a very destructive impact on the self-esteem of women, who on a daily basis notice gradual changes to their bodyliness. What is most dangerous about such discourse is a situation when “the belief that a real woman must be physically attractive, makes a fifty-years old woman an enemy of her own body”³¹. She begins to spend her energy on fighting the signs of ageing, buys anti-wrinkle creams, and tries to hoodwink time. Unfortunately, even the very best cosmetics are unable to stop natural processes of ageing, which in many cases may result in self-aversion and the absence of self-acceptance. This is very straightforwardly expressed in the following statement: “we may say that through her strong bond with her body, the woman loses her brightness, loses a bit of herself. ‘For her [the woman – added by A.Z., A.C., M.B.], the look is not just a trait, as it is for a man: she is her looks. Practically every aspect of a woman’s look manifests who she is and how she should be treated”³². The above shows yet another extremely important task for geragogues, and pedagogues as such: the need to fight with the double discrimination against older women (on the grounds of age and the sex), and to shape attitudes which are full of understanding for the specific situation of women as early as in children.

It is also worth remembering that “it is not old age which is a difficult period – it is the very process of ‘becoming an old person’ which is the hardest thing”. K. Wiśniewska-Roszkowska (1986, 1989) discusses the so-called art of ageing, which she defines as the ability to adjust to the new situations introduced by the old age and to recreate one’s sense of life”³³. Changes in the sexual activity are one such new state of things with which seniors must cope. Older people display various attitudes related to the above. K. Imieliński believes that we may talk about two groups of people:

- seniors, for whom sexual life has always had an important value – and they are at the same time the persons who fear the loss of this value at the stage of old age;
- seniors, who very easily accept the label of asexual persons – sex has probably never been much of a value for them, and they can even perceive the period of old age as a rescue from this burdensome sphere³⁴.

³⁰ B. Bartosz, E. Zierkiewicz, *Starość w narracjach kobiet młodych i starszych* [Old Age in the Narrations of Young and Older Women], [in:] *Starsze kobiety w kulturze i społeczeństwie* [Older Women in Culture and Society], E. Zierkiewicz, A. Łysak (eds.), Wyd. MarMar, Wrocław 2005, p. 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³² A. Cieślak, A. Zubik, M. Bańczarowska, ‘Starość’ w narracjach kobiet w drugiej połowie życia [‘Old Age’ in Narrations of Women in the Second Half of their Life], [in:] *Starsze kobiety w kulturze i społeczeństwie* [Older Women in Culture and Society], E. Zierkiewicz, A. Łysak (eds.), Wyd. MarMar, Wrocław 2005, p. 34.

³³ Z. Szarota, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

³⁴ M. Grabowska, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

We should in particular remember about the second group so as to avoid an accidental going from one extreme to another and changing the seniors' label from that of asexual persons to the persons who want to be sexual at any price, thus putting them under just another sort of pressure. Human sexuality is a very intimate and delicate issue, and, consequently, interpersonal differences are of great importance here.

Another well-known Polish sexologist, Z. Lew-Starowicz, writes that the relevant literature mentions three basic attitudes:

- the defensive one: an ambition-based reaction to sexual failure, escapist strategies, failure to admit sexual failures, an individual does not seek specialist help or support from his/her partner;
- the destructive one: resignation from sexual activity when sexual problems appear, self-isolation, frequent depressive changes;
- the optimistic one: the individual tries to eliminate the emerging sexual difficulties and endeavours to make his/her permanent relationship with a partner satisfying³⁵.

The adoption of each of the above attitudes brings along certain easily anticipated consequences for a given individual and his/her partner as well as their relationship. Escapist strategies, self-isolation, a total abandonment of sexual activity, etc. – all this, if not frankly discussed by the lovers, can have a very negative impact on their relationship, since the other party will have to face a situation which is not understandable, and can rationalise it in a wrong way, e.g. blaming her-/himself. As it happens, changes in one's sexuality and physical attractiveness may be perceived by seniors as a crisis, and what can be desirable as a result is specialist help: not only of a medical kind, but also, or perhaps even mainly, psychological and pedagogical assistance related to informing, counselling, and supporting.

It is worth reminding both the seniors and the rest of society that sexuality is an integral part of human life, regardless of age. This was insightfully expressed by prof. Z. Izdebski, who said the following words during the Third Age Forum in 2011: "In love, the question of age should not matter at all – love is simply love and that is it. There is no point in looking at age"³⁶. Although the statement that people are sexual beings and regardless of their age have the right to experience love and sexual life is something obvious, not everyone is able to accept it³⁷. This is all the more so as the issue of senior sexuality is covered by a specific taboo, i.e. a culture-based ban on the performance of certain acts or talking about certain subjects, resulting from customs and morality, and including sanctions related to

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁶ M. Wysocka, *Nie patrzmy na wiek* [Let us Not Look at Age], http://www.noweperspektywy.org.pl/materialy/press/puls_medycyny_2011_05_25_2.pdf, accessed on 07.06.2012.

³⁷ M. Beisert, *W poszukiwaniu modelu seksualności człowieka* [In Search of a Model of Human Sexuality], [in:] *Seksualność w cyklu życia człowieka* [Sexuality in the Human Life Cycle], M. Beisert (ed.), PWN, Warszawa 2006, p. 8.

its infringement³⁸. According to Wojciech Burszta, the sphere of sexuality is covered by a taboo in the majority of cultures³⁹.

The breaking of the taboo of the sexual activity of seniors may significantly contribute to an improvement of the quality of their life⁴⁰ of which sexuality is an important element. The introduction of these issues to the scope of interest of the contemporary geragogy should become a challenge to the discipline, especially when we become aware that the issue has so far been discussed mainly from the medical, psychological, cultural, and anthropological points of view, but there are few pedagogical works in this scope.

What is most important is “not to allow anyone to mentally castrate you: not to let anyone convince you that senior sex is ugly, inappropriate, improper, that you are an old satyr and a female sex addict all covered with wrinkles, that this is all filthy, disgusting and repulsive”⁴¹. Sexologists increasingly say that although human sexuality undergoes transformations during one’s lifetime, it never ceases to exist and we remain sexual beings until the end of our days⁴². Moreover, it can be an expression of a great affection, and not just a symptom of pure physicality. Therefore, it should be analysed in the context of a person as a whole, holistically. “What is wonderful is that we begin to talk about this aspect of senior life and notice its significance. The holistic concept of the human being postulates a co-dependency of the mind, body and spirit, and therefore we cannot refuse older persons the right to satisfy their needs: both spiritual ones and ones related to sexuality”⁴³. Moreover, old age as such needs to be approached in an interdisciplinary manner⁴⁴, and for this reason the modern geragogy should draw from many fields of knowledge (such as andragogy, geriatrics, geriatric rehabilitation, psychology, demography, and sociology) in order to be able to recognise the problems of life in this period from many different perspectives and as much as possible contribute to the improvement of the life of seniors. What is also important is to remember that the sexual activity of sen-

³⁸ See W. Kopaliński, *Słownik mitów i tradycji kultury* [Dictionary of the Myths and Traditions of Culture], Kraków 1994, following A. Tyrpa, *Losy słowa tabu w Polsce (od encyklopedii Orgelbranda do prasy popularnej)* [The History of the Word Taboo in Poland (from Orgelbrand’s Encyclopedia to Popular Press)], [in:] *Tabu w języku i kulturze* [Taboo in Language and Culture], A. Dąbrowska (ed.), “Język a Kultura”, vol. 21, Wrocław 2009, p. 16; A. Dąbrowska, *Zmiany obszarów podlegających tabu we współczesnej kulturze* [Changes of Taboo Areas in Modern Culture], [in:] *Tom jubileuszowy* [Jubilee Volume], A. Dąbrowska (ed.), “Język a Kultura”, vol. 20, Wrocław 2008, p. 75.

³⁹ W. Burszta, *Antropologia kultury* [Anthropology of Culture], Wyd. Zys i s-ka, Poznań 1998, p. 15.

⁴⁰ The quality of senior life was comprehensively discussed by Agata Kowgier, who turned attention to the various ways in which the notion is defined depending on the adoption of an objective or subjective perspective, a point of view of gerontology, or medicine; see A. Kowgier, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–60.

⁴¹ B. Pietkiewicz, *Urok siwych gołąbków* [The Charm of Grey Pigeons], <http://www.polityka.pl/psychologia/poradnikpsychologiczny/1503434,1,milosc-na-starosc.read#ixzz1qvLuImUS>, accessed on 03.06.2012.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ A. Kowgier, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ *Starość w perspektywie studiów pedagogicznych* [Old Age in the Perspective of Pedagogical Studies], A. Tokaj (ed.), *Studia i Monografie Wyższej Szkoły Humanistycznej im. Króla Stanisława Leszczyńskiego w Lesznie*, Leszno 2008, p. 8.

iors is primarily determined by “the frequency of sexual contacts in the earlier stage of their life, physical and mental health, as well as psychological factors”⁴⁵. I would like to once again stress the importance of the latter, and the fact that they are largely influenced by the stereotypes and prejudices functioning in our society.

And yet, according to the Declaration of Sexual Rights, “Sexuality is an integral part of the personality of every human being. Its full development depends upon the satisfaction of the basic human needs such as the desire for contact, intimacy, emotional expression, pleasure, tenderness and love.” [Every human being has, inter alia – the author’s addition] “the right to sexual equality. This refers to freedom from all forms of discrimination, regardless of sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, social class, religion, or physical and emotional disability. [What should also be universal is – the author’s addition] the right to comprehensive sexuality education. This is a lifelong process from birth throughout the lifecycle and it should involve all social institutions”⁴⁶. Therefore, the above results in two important things for geragogy. Firstly, age should not lead to discrimination in the area of sexuality. Secondly, sexual education is not something concerning solely persons entering adulthood with a view to their preparation for activity in this sphere, but the need for it exists at every stage of life. Perhaps it would be a good idea to include it in the curriculum of classes for seniors learning at Universities of the Third Age, or placing more emphasis on the topic in various institutions and organisations for older persons? This is because there is a shortage of concrete educational or counselling-related offers for seniors in this scope. Anyway, what is equally necessary is the undertaking of the issues with young people in order to make them aware that the autumn of life is not an asexual period. Reliable education in this context could increase the level of social acceptance for the sexual activity of seniors. However, not much is done in this respect. Some works concerning the issue, addressed to the older readers, are published, but unfortunately, despite the richness of topics they discuss, they are often written in an excessively medical language, and their authors entangle themselves in very detailed biological issues, which can significantly hamper the understanding of the content of such publications⁴⁷. Anyway, it results from my interviews with seniors that the topic of senior sexuality is discussed mainly with doctors and in leaflets available in their waiting rooms, although their very often complex language makes them entirely incomprehensible, and therefore useless for an average senior. In my opinion, the topic of senior sex is ignored in the public space from perspectives other than solely medical (and even this is infrequent). There are no social campaigns, media debates or any other projects of this kind which could have a positive influence on the perception of the issue by both seniors themselves and the younger generations.

⁴⁵ A. and A. Fabiś, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

⁴⁶ *Declaration of Sexual Rights*, <http://www.funpzs.org.pl/deklaracja-praw-seksualnych.html>, accessed on 07.06.2012.

⁴⁷ This can be exemplified by Zygmunt Zdrojewicz’s work *Seksualność człowieka w wieku późnej dorosłości* [Human Sexuality in Late Adulthood] published in 2011.

In order to check how seniors themselves perceive the topic of sexuality in the autumn of life and whether they believe that it is covered by a taboo, and if so, whether it is necessary to fight that taboo, I carried out a qualitative study comprising 20 unstructured interviews (with 12 women and 8 men). The subjects came from Wrocław and Rawicz, i.e. both from a city and a small town environment⁴⁸. Before starting my research, I had to define the point in which old age begins. "J. Piotrowski (1973) maintains that old age is a cultural phenomenon with a biological basis related to the weakening of strengths (involution). There is no objective or natural threshold of old age. Relating the onset of old age with the chronological age of 70, 65, or 55 years is purely arbitrary, conventional [...]. [Also – author's addition] many medical-biological concepts provide that the beginning of ageing is barely perceptible"⁴⁹. I therefore assumed, purely arbitrarily, that I would carry out my interviews with people of more than 55 years of age; eventually, my subjects included 8 persons aged 55–65, 7 persons aged 66–80, and 5 persons of more than 80 years of age.

I commenced each interview with the questions "what is old age?" and "when does it begin?" The answers were dominated by threads relating to the end of occupational activity, and the period of relaxation and calmness, as shown by the following statements of the subjects:

- "Old age is the time when you do not have to work. The time of looking after grandchildren" (Barbara, 71 years);
- "Old age is when you need calmness, relaxation, and when you are less active" (Włodzimierz, 66 years).
- There were also some very sad responses, showing old age as the period of loneliness:
- "It is hard, infirmity, something God has not been successful with. It is when people become unnecessary, when they are a burden" (Stefania, 87 years).

Moreover, in the opinion of almost all the subjects, it is impossible to clearly determine the beginning of old age. The majority of the subjects indicated the role of subjective feelings in its definition. Health-related problems as well as the role of the cessation of occupational activity were often mentioned as criteria defining the onset of old age. It is also worth quoting a statement which accentuates the fact that a loss of one's partner may result in the acceleration of the ageing processes: "Lonely persons age faster" (Włodzimierz, 66 years). This short sentence very clearly shows the importance of the presence and support of one's dear ones for the physical and mental health of the seniors.

Another issue discussed during the interviews was whether sex was at all important for people in the autumn of their life. Here, the subjects also highlighted

⁴⁸ Rawicz is a small town (about 25,000 inhabitants) in the Wielkopolskie Province. http://powiatrawicki.pl/portal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=45&Itemid=46, accessed on 02.06.2012.

⁴⁹ Z. Szarota, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23.

the importance of one's health, temperament, but also differences between individuals as well as the role played by feelings:

- "It depends on one's temperament and health" (Wanda, 61 years).
- "Everyone has different needs; feelings and health are important" (Piotr, 66 years).

There were also answers strongly stressing that human sexuality does not vanish with age: "Age has nothing to do with it. Everyone needs tenderness!" (Maria, 74 years). It is worth quoting one lady's statement: "Of course it is, people just do not talk about it" (Krystyna, 68 years). It shows best that the seniors themselves notice the problem of this issue being a taboo.

In the further part of the interviews I asked whether the subjects at all talked about sex, and if so, who they talked about it with. The majority of the subjects revealed that they only talked about it with their spouse/partner, or perhaps a doctor. Only 5 persons (all of them women) said that they also talked about it with their acquaintances and friends. At the same time, several persons revealed that they discussed sex very rarely, almost not at all. The results show that the seniors in question do not tackle the topic of sexuality in a free manner and that this area is reserved only to those people who are closest to them.

According to the subjects, the media do not discuss the issue very often. Only a single person expressed a belief that the media do not refrain from the topic. Four subjects stated that it is featured in the press, radio, television, and on the internet, but that it is treated in a jocular, or even offensive way. According to the majority, the topic is absent in the media. The subjects stressed that it is not attractive to the media and the fact that sex is shown only in the context of youth and beauty. "There is nothing about it in the media. If there is, then only in TV series, or brief episodes in films, but certainly not Polish ones" (Jadwiga, 59 years). The quoted statement also stresses the specific nature of Polish culture which, in comparison with the West, is, according to some people, much more closed to certain topics and develops stronger taboos of some spheres of individual and collective life.

The two previous questions were an introduction to the most important issue of whether older persons believed that their sexuality was a taboo: both from the general social perspective and in terms of their individual biographies. A decisive majority of subjects declared that it is. Several persons could not answer the question clearly. Differences between younger and older seniors were stressed many times:

- "For the younger seniors, it is perhaps decreasingly so, but for those born before the war it certainly is. They were brought up differently. Apart from this, it all also depends on one's education" (Bogdan, 68 years).
- "It no doubt is, although fortunately the younger ones [seniors – author's addition] talk about it more and more often" (Włodzimierz, 66 years).

Apart from this, the subjects also noticed the absence of the topic in the public space, and its marginalization in the discussion of sexuality as such.

Developing this line of thought, I wanted to learn whether, in view of the above, the fact that senior sexuality was considered as covered by a taboo by the

majority of the subjects, it was a problem for them, and whether they would like the situation to be changed. From among the responses, two of them grasped the essence of the issue:

- “Problem... it is hard to say. It is a pity that people talk about it so little, as later even if you do not know something, you do not even know who to ask, as it is a shame at this age, and you would not feel at ease to ask the doctor about everything” (Maria, 74 years).
- “It probably is a problem, because today people talk about everything – so it would be good to talk about it, too. But old age is ugly and unnecessary, so people don’t. [...] I once wanted to talk about it with an acquaintance, and she said that at my age I should better think of saving for my funeral than about such things...” (Jadwiga, 59 years).

The above statements tackle two important aspects of the issue. They confirm the thesis that seniors need sexuality-related educational/counselling actions. Apart from this, they show the feeling of shame, embarrassment and resentment that old age is typically perceived as asexual, and that older people are not in the position to deal with this sphere of life. The fact that one of the subjects described old age as ugly and unnecessary reflects her belief that this stage of life is marked by a low social status. It is here that education has its role to play.

Beliefs similar to the ones presented above provide us with evidence of the importance of the social image of old age for the self-evaluation and mental well-being of the seniors. For this reason, I also tackled the question of the perception of senior sexuality by young generations. The answers to this question were the most diverse. The subjects often indicated the generation gap and the differences between generations as factors which make it difficult to assess what young people may think about the topic: “ I do not know... At a certain age, everyone has different needs, sometimes tenderness is what counts more... It is difficult to say, because in general young people have a different perspective on life” (Józef, 85 years). It was noticeable that the question caused a certain embarrassment, which may have been an indication that the subjects are concerned about the way young people perceive them and that this is also important for them. They often evaded a clear answer and formulated their responses in a wishful tone: “Well, I hope that the young people look at it in a normal way. I would like it to be so” (Barbara, 71 years).

The last issue discussed in the interviews was whether it was at all necessary to discuss senior sexuality more often in e.g. the media, educational facilities, via social campaigns, or in any other way. The most important conclusion from this part of the study was that there was not a single response which would negate such a need or considered it senseless. Seniors expressed opinions stressing the naturalness of the sexual needs of older people, which shows in itself that it is necessary to talk about it: “Sex at this age is certainly no longer pretty, but it is still there. Older people also have their needs [...]. That is why it is necessary to talk about it more” (Jadwiga, 59 years). There were also some statements suggesting which concrete topics should be discussed and in what form: “Yes... mainly in terms of health-related issues. But it would be good to read about it in the press,

because older people read newspapers rather than use the internet" (Barbara, 71 years). I allowed myself to summarise the opinions collected with one short statement: "After all, it does not make any harm to talk about it. It is always better to know more than to know little" (Irena, 60 years). This sentence very clearly illustrates the belief concerning the role of education and the need for it.

The basic conclusion resulting from the study is that it confirms the finding of the earlier studies⁵⁰ that old age is definitely not asexual. However, what is more important than this, no longer surprising, statement is that many responses from the subjects include a regret or a feeling of social pressure that older persons should no longer deal with the topic of sex. The seniors participating in the study can see that this issue is missing from the media discourse and in the daily life practice and, at the same time, they believe that this should be changed and that it is worth talking about it.

For this reason I wanted to express a belief that the taboo of senior sexuality should become the subject of interest of modern geragogy, whose tasks include the combating of stereotypes concerning old age and the improvement of the quality of life of people at such a stage of life. Geragogues, starting from the holistic vision of the human being, should not ignore the sexual sphere of older people's life, but support adaptive processes also related to changes in this scope. Additionally, education concerning sexuality in the autumn of life should encompass both seniors and younger generations so as to combat negative stereotypes, create a better image of old age and shape more positive attitudes towards seniors, which will also have an impact on their self-assessment and the way they perceive their own old age. This was demonstrated by the research concerning the impact of cultural and ethnic factors on the sexuality of older people carried out in 1982 by Winn and Newton, who compared the issue in 106 various cultures of the world. What is no doubt worth attention from among the conclusions of the research project is that cultural expectations and social attitude towards senior sexuality support sexual activity in the autumn of life if they are positive, and weaken it if they are negative. Hence, we can see the significance of social attitudes to the topic and the related great role of education in this scope⁵¹. Society should learn to understand the specific nature of the life of older people, and to respect their needs and problems. Ignoring the topic or perceiving senior sex in the categories of something unaesthetic and immoral may even be treated as a sign of ageism, and certainly as an element of symbolic violence which causes seniors to feel that they do not have

⁵⁰ Over the years, a lot of studies focusing on senior sexuality were carried out, just to mention the ones performed by Pfeiffer et al. (1969), Brecher (1984), Kivela (1986), Bretschneider, McCoy (1988), Marsiglio, Donnelly (1991), Bergstrom-Walan, Nielsen (1990), or Call, Sprecher and Schwartz (1995). However, all of them were quantitative and were mainly concentrated on checking the sexual activity of seniors – measuring how often they have sex. Apart from this, the researchers analysed various age groups. Some of them defined people in their late adulthood as ones who were older than 60, while others as those after 70, or 80. This makes it problematic to compare the generated results. However, all the studies provide one common conclusion: seniors are sexually active. See M. Cichocka, *op. cit.*, pp. 219–225.

⁵¹ M. Cichocka, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

the right to joyful and full experience of sexuality as a part of their personalities. Therefore, the contemporary geragogy should, as a task, also use the assumptions of emancipatory education, which promotes critical reflection on the mechanisms of oppression and which, noticing the areas of social injustice and marginalization, diminishes them by distributing knowledge⁵².

Summary

The Taboo of Senior Sexuality as a Challenge to Contemporary Geragogy

The population is ageing and, according to demographers, this phenomenon will be subject to even greater intensification. Despite the fact that the specific problems of people in the autumn of life are increasingly recognised, we still have to deal with ageism, and topics such as senior sexuality remain a taboo. In addition, the prevailing consumerism and the cult of youth and the body seem to move any possible discussion to the margins of social life. Besides, the existence of numerous myths and stereotypes preserves the not always truthful picture of the sexual activity of older people. At the same time, the social sciences increasingly extend the necessity of learning into old age, and the task of the education should be to break senior-related taboos of various kinds. Moreover, we can recently witness an increasingly apparent need for the education which should address both the older people themselves and the rest of the society, shape the attitude of understanding and acceptance, and combat stereotypes and ignorance related to the problems affecting this age group, which in turn, would have the effect of improving the quality of their lives. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the taboo of senior sexuality should become the subject of interest and a challenge for contemporary geragogy. This paper was inspired by interviews with seniors and therefore its topic is outlined on the basis of the perspective of those concerned.

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⁵² M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, *Pedagogika emancypacyjna. Rozwój świadomości krytycznej człowieka* [Emancipatory Pedagogy. The Development of Human Critical Awareness], GWP, Gdańsk 2006.

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