Łukasik / Pikuła / Jagielska / Prajzner

# Existential Needs of Older Adults

## Meaning in Life, Religiosity, Generativity and Inner Peace

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*By*

Joanna M. Łukasik
Norbert G. Pikuła
Katarzyna Jagielska
Arkadiusz Prajzner

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# Introduction

The existential needs identified in the title of this study, viewed through the qualitative aspects of older adults' lives, have been the subject of research in psychology, sociology, theology, social gerontology, and, as considered in this study, management and quality sciences. From the perspective of management and quality sciences, the research presented here represents a novel contribution, both in terms of its findings and its implications for future research and practice. Specifically, the findings have implications for the management of older adults' needs and resources in ways that can increase life satisfaction and improve perceived quality of life.

Research on existential needs is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary. Understanding this phenomenon requires the collaboration of multiple academic fields. Without such cooperation, it would be difficult to fully comprehend the complexity of existential needs or to apply research findings to both future studies and practical management of the resources of older adults in a manner that accommodates their most fundamental existential needs.

A substantial body of literature in these disciplines has been devoted to the concepts of satisfaction and quality of life (e.g., Baumann, 2006; Derbis & Bańka, 1998; Halicka, 2004; Humboldt et al., 2014; Gregorczuk-Prosicka, 2021; Jachimowicz & Kostka, 2009; Jagielska, 2020; Lassota, 2006; Liberska, 2017; Pikuła, 2011; Sischka et al., 2020; Sosnowska, 2012; Straś-Romanowska et al., 2005; Şimşek, 2009; Topp et al., 2015; Zielińska-Wieczkowska & Kędziora-Kornatowska, 2010; Zych, 2003). By contrast, existential and spiritual needs have received comparatively little attention, particularly in the social sciences. This is a significant omission, as such needs are among the most important determinants of quality of life from a holistic perspective (Baumann, 2006, p. 170).

This monograph centers on existential needs (cf. Büssing, 2021; Büssing et al., 2018) for several reasons. First, this topic is a niche area of research in Poland. Second, studies in this field have only rarely employed validated, standardised measurement instruments. Consequently, the limited empirical evidence available makes it difficult to develop and implement evidence-based methods and tools designed to help older adults achieve inner peace, spirituality, religiosity, and generativity, all of which constitute key existential needs in older adulthood (cf. Bauer, 2019; McAdams, 2000; McAdams et al., 2004; Pitkala et al., 2004; Wojciechowska, 2010).

The research presented here helps fill this gap by yielding new empirical evidence and offering conclusions with practical implications for professionals working with older adults. This is of particular importance in the later

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stages of life, when seniors increasingly face issues related to mortality and seek a sense of inner peace manifested in a positive appraisal of their life experiences (cf. Erikson, 1968; Keyes & Waterman, 2003; Staudinger & Kunzmann, 2005; Steuden, 2012; Straś-Romanowska, 2000).

The main objective of this monograph is to evaluate the extent to which existential needs are experienced and fulfilled among older adults and to examine the relationships between existential needs (defined here as religiosity, spirituality/reflection, inner peace, and generativity) and selected psychological variables, including life satisfaction, loneliness, well-being, escape from illness, and trust in God. The study also considers health-related and demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, educational level, and place of residence.

The volume is organized into six main chapters, together with an introduction, a concluding chapter drawing together the principal findings and conclusions, and a bibliography. The first chapter situates the lives of older adults in Poland in the context of rapid social, cultural, and technological change. Their experiences are analyzed through the framework of life satisfaction and quality of life, with particular emphasis on to the conditions necessary for dignified aging. The chapter also discusses the influence of geographical location on older adults' lives, on the premise that place of residence molds traditions, social norms, values, and perceptions of social change. Special attention is devoted to the socio-cultural heritage of former Galicia, which continues to influence attitudes toward work, religion, tradition, cultural heritage, and everyday life among the study participants. The second chapter investigates the everyday experiences of older adults in Poland and the factors that contribute to their sense of meaning and purpose in life. These issues are analyzed in relation to well-being and quality of life.

The third chapter focuses on psychological and sociological perspectives on existential needs in later life, specifically religiosity, spirituality, inner peace, and generativity. It also investigates the relationship between these dimensions and life satisfaction, while considering the role of socio-cultural experiences associated with the participants' regions of residence. The fourth chapter outlines the methodological underpinnings of the study. It defines the research objectives, research questions, overall research design, the instruments used for data collection, and the characteristics of the study sample. The fifth chapter reports the findings according to the major research themes and provides a statistical description of the results. The sixth chapter contains a discussion of the findings and concludes with a summary and recommendations for future research. It also delineates practical implications for social policy, psychological services, and the management of older adults' existential

needs. In addition, the chapter discusses the limitations of the study and identifies directions for methodological improvement in future research.

We would like to thank Professor Stefan M. Kwiatkowski and Professor Janusz Surzykiewicz for their intellectual support and for their guidance in the empirical analysis of the research data. Our gratitude also goes to the older adults who took the time to participate in the study by completing the questionnaires complete the study questionnaires. We are equally grateful to the social workers and healthcare professionals – Karolina Jastrząb, Paulina Mączka, Natalia Kulińska, Beata Pregler, and Ewa Winiarska – whose commitment and assistance made it possible to reach a large group of older adults living in the region of former Galicia.

It is our hope that this discussion, together with the findings presented in the study, will encourage readers to pursue further inquiry into the issues examined herein. Improving our understanding of older adults' existential needs, particularly as they are shaped by upbringing, socialization, and specific socio-cultural experiences, calls for the development of support strategies that are responsive to their unique attitudes, needs, and ways of understanding themselves and the world around them.

CHAPTER 1

# Social change and the quality of life of older adults

## 1.1 Social change and its implications for the psychosocial functioning of older adults

Change can be viewed through the lens of people's life achievements, personal development, and accomplishments, as well as through the outcomes of interaction, cooperation, and collective action among groups of varying sizes. It may also stem from the ability of individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions to transcend existing limitations and create new forms of social activity. In this regard, the everyday activities of individuals, families, and other social groups, including occupational and religious communities, manifested through work, education, cultural participation, and civic engagement, contribute to progress in social life, as well as in the economy, science, and technology. In many respects, these processes create a more favorable social environment and improved opportunities for future generations. Accordingly, change may be defined as a process of transformation resulting in the emergence of new conditions or states of affairs (cf. Szymański, 2021). One form of such transformation is social change. As Anthony Giddens notes, In order to establish whether a significant change has occurred, it is necessary to demonstrate that the fundamental structure of the object under study has undergone transformation over time. In the case of human societies, determining the extent and nature of change requires demonstrating the degree to which their basic institutions have been modified over a given period. Any claim that change has taken place depends on identifying those elements that have remained constant, since only against this background can the extent of change be assessed (2002, p. 65).

While time constitutes a defining feature of social change, its scope and reach are equally important considerations. According to Piotr Sztompka, social change may occur either within a social system or affect the system in its entirety. To understand these processes, attention must be paid to elements such as social bonds, community ties, interactions, patterns of action, institutional functions, system boundaries, subsystems, and environmental conditions. Considering these elements and dimensions makes it possible to identify changes in the composition, structure, functions, boundaries, relationships, and environment of social systems.

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Social change encompasses:

- transformations in social organization and in patterns of thinking and behavior over time;
- modifications in the ways societies are structured and governed;
- evolving relationships among individuals, groups, organizations, cultures, and communities;
- changes in behavioral patterns, social relations, institutions, and social structures (Sztompka, 2005, p. 22).

Sztompka argues that some social processes can be referred to as morphogenetic, as they lead to entirely new social conditions, social structures, and forms of social organisation. These processes are truly creative in nature because they bring about fundamental innovations. Not only do they involve quantitative modifications, but they also entail significant qualitative change and may therefore be regarded as forms of social transformation, which is distinguished through changes in social structures accompanied by substantial modifications to the network of relationships within a social system or socio-cultural field. Changes in function may also occur, accompanied by significant modifications in the way a system or social field operates. These transformations affect the very core of social reality and are experienced throughout all areas of social life (Sztompka, 2005, pp. 32–34).

In his discussion of structural change, Sztompka distinguishes several major domains of social change. These include changes in the composition of a social system, its structure, the functions carried out by its constituent parts, its boundaries, and its environment (Sztompka, 2002, pp. 437–438). Changes in composition are frequently accompanied by structural changes, and technological developments are of particular importance in this process. Changes in a system's functions may arise as a consequence of both compositional and structural transformations. For example, as the contemporary family has progressively shifted towards a smaller, nuclear model, its composition and structure often make it more difficult to perform functions that were once naturally fulfilled in the traditional extended family, including the provision of care for older family members. Functional change increasingly embodies the ways in which individuals, social groups, and organisations interpret new social circumstances and adapt to changing conditions (cf. Pikuła, 2016, p. 39).

Older adults are affected by these changes in a particularly profound way. Compared with earlier stages of their lives, they now experience a rapidly changing social reality characterised by unprecedented technological and scientific advances, cultural transformations, changing patterns of behaviour among younger generations, and evolving norms and values. These processes

inevitably shape the everyday functioning of older people and influence their perceptions of quality of life.

The pace of innovation in virtually every sphere of life is remarkable and continues to redefine established ways of living. In the span of a single generation, culture can undergo swift and sometimes radical transformation. Such developments are accompanied by far-reaching social, organisational, cultural, and behavioural changes brought about by technological progress, innovations in production processes, economic crises, and major political transitions. They are likewise accompanied by shifts in systems of values, cultural patterns, and lifestyles (cf. Bauman, 2003, p. 14).

In addition to the breathtaking pace of change and the emergence of previously unimaginable opportunities for self-development, professional achievement, and success, contemporary society also creates a temptation to live without constraints and necessitates adaptation to fluidity, uncertainty, and little predictability. Whereas younger people are often well equipped to cope with such conditions, older adults may experience them more acutely, having been raised in a traditional, adaptive culture in which reality appeared stable, ordered, predictable, and therefore secure.

Older adults who were raised and lived in a traditional social order – characterised by socially prescribed norms, established status positions, and social roles legitimised by tradition and reinforced by a strongly institutionalised system of values (Szymański, 2014, p. 53) – often find it difficult to orient themselves in modern society (Zych, 2009, p. 66 ff.). This may contribute to the forms of difference, exclusion, and marginalisation that Giddens identifies as consequences of modernity (Giddens, 2002, p. 10).

Global processes of change fundamentally undermine traditional lifestyles, established patterns of living, customs, and social practices, replacing them with the norms and expectations of modernity. As Giddens argues, change intensifies the interdependence between global influences and individual agency (Giddens, 2002, p. 3). In this way, globalisation alters the condition of human beings in the contemporary world. As noted by Mirosław Szymański, people increasingly face the dilemma of being "in between": balancing curiosity and openness towards novelty with understandable concerns, anxieties, and uncertainties associated with risk-taking and entering unfamiliar territory (Szymański, 2014, p. 55). Under such circumstances, individuals cannot remain passive observers. They are constantly compelled to seek their place in the world, their priorities, values, and sense of meaning in life in response to ever-present change. The consequences are particularly significant for older adults whose formative years and adult lives unfolded in a traditional social order that demanded neither constant unconventional choices nor the assumption of the risks associated with them.

The inability to adapt to life in today's "liquid modern" reality exposes older adults to the risk of exclusion from social, cultural, and economic participation. Such circumstances frequently result in "feelings of frustration and doubt, a sense of inadequacy, and the perception of living in a separate and inferior reality" (Szymański, 2014, p. 123). Not infrequently do they also produce an unsettling awareness of "a considerable gulf between the affluence, beauty, and attractiveness of the modern yet inaccessible world and the primitiveness, backwardness, and deprivation of the bleak reality in which one lives" (Szymański, 2014, pp. 123–124). For many older people, recognising the existence of numerous barriers – some of them virtually insurmountable – can lead to apathy, social withdrawal, and retreat into an isolated world of one's own.

According to Piotr Sztompka, the language of social progress has increasingly been supplanted by the language of crisis. This is reflected in popular consciousness through attitudes characterised by "disappointment, disorientation, helplessness, a loss of meaning, the erosion of future-oriented thinking, a weakening sense of continuity with tradition, the privatisation of goals, and disregard for public concerns. In social theory, it manifests itself in relativism and subjectivism, scepticism towards the regularities of social life, an emphasis on contingency and emotions, and the replacement of ethical values by superficial aesthetic experiences. The widespread expansion of postmodernist thought signifies a rejection of the intellectual traditions emblematic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity and, consequently, of the idea of progress itself. Even more explicit repudiations of progress can be found in fashionable catastrophic and futurological visions. Increasingly, faith in progress is dismissed as naïve and outdated: a relic of past epochs" (Sztompka, 2005, pp. 332–333).

Among the major social changes shaping contemporary societies is the widespread ageing of populations in many developed European countries, including Poland. This phenomenon refers both to the increasing proportion of people aged 65 and over and to rising life expectancy, with a growing number of people living into their eighties and nineties (*Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za 2024*). Current demographic trends indicate that Polish society is undergoing this process as a result of longer life expectancy associated with improved living conditions, as well as declining birth rates. According to *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za 2024*, "the number of people aged 60 and over reached nearly 10 million, representing an increase of 85,300 compared with 2023. In 2024, older adults accounted for 26.6% of the total population" (p. 5). These demographic shifts are attributable to: (1) a substantial decline in fertility and birth rates below the level required for sim-

ple population replacement; (2) decreasing mortality rates, particularly infant mortality; (3) the conscious postponement of parenthood; (4) a growing preference for non-marital partnerships and the increasing prevalence of alternative family forms; (5) increasing life expectancy; and (6) intensified migration flows, accompanied by a shift from net emigration to immigration (Miazga & Kruba, 2023, pp. 11–20; Szarota, 2013, p. 6).

These trends have also been reinforced by scientific and technological progress, advances in medicine, and higher public awareness of hygiene and healthy lifestyles. However, in a context of rapid social change, older generations often find it difficult to keep pace with developments in many areas of life. From the standpoint of social development, older adults may also become culturally and cognitively distanced from contemporary social realities, as they frequently identify with ways of life, systems of values, and patterns of thought associated with earlier historical periods. Moreover, many of today's older adults have primary, vocational, or secondary education, which may affect their interpretation of social reality, learning strategies, and capacity to function under conditions of ongoing change (cf. Pikuła, 2016).

The analysis suggests that the age composition of a population is itself a significant factor in processes of social change. Population ageing should therefore be viewed not only as an outcome of social transformations but also as a catalyst for further social shifts. Contemporary Poland still includes a generation whose formative years and much of whose adult lives were spent under a socialist socio-political system. Many members of this generation have found it difficult to adapt to the changes brought about by the post-socialist transformation.

The new system introduced different forms of employment and income generation, a new standard of living, and a different relationship between the state and society. Poland's opening to international influences and its accession to the European Union, accelerated these processes. In order to meet the demands of contemporary life and compensate for opportunities restricted under the previous regime, Poles have had to learn how to exercise freedom and personal agency, both as members of society and as individuals. At the same time, Polish society has become increasingly differentiated in material, social, and ideological terms.

Older adults have responded to these changes in different ways. While some have adapted successfully and sought actively to participate in contemporary social life, the marginalisation of older generations remains a significant concern. Evidence from the literature and empirical studies demonstrates that older people are at risk of exclusion in numerous areas of social life. Their participation in the labour market, political activity, and social rela-

tionships beyond the family has diminished (Czapiński & Panek, 2009; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za 2024*, 2024; Jagielska, 2020; Pikuła, 2016). Similar processes are evident in mass culture and public discourse. Many older people experience a sense of social invisibility and of social redundancy. They may feel alienated by a culture that privileges speed, activity, productivity, and self-improvement. The pervasive celebration of youth, physical fitness, and efficiency, together with the stigmatisation of ageing, frailty, and dependency, reinforces processes of social exclusion (cf. Pikuła et al., 2013; Maćkowicz, 2018). In consequence, some older adults retreat into isolated social worlds, detached from the dominant currents of contemporary society.

Two conclusions may be drawn from the foregoing analysis. First, social and cultural change is proceeding at an extraordinary pace, and younger generations, who are generally more receptive to novelty and innovation, are often able to internalise new customs, social norms, lifestyles, and patterns of behaviour more quickly and naturally than older generations. Second, older adults often represent different ways of thinking, acting, and living because they were raised in different cultural and social environments. These differences increasingly contribute to misunderstanding and tensions. Some of the most significant changes affecting older adults in contemporary societies concern the family. Traditional multigenerational households, once common, have gradually given way to families consisting of no more than two generations living together. This has important implications for intergenerational relationships, family solidarity, and especially the provision of care and support (Szafranek & Halicka, 2012; Wojciechowska, 2005).

As traditional family structures continue to evolve, intergenerational tensions may become one of the defining social conflicts of the twenty-first century, replacing the class-based divisions that characterised earlier periods. Changing family structures and relationships have a far-reaching impact on the social functioning of older adults. Older people are often those most affected by the destabilisation of their social networks and by the weakening of value systems that once provided direction, and purpose in life. With growing frequency, many experience loneliness and a sense of rejection, sometimes even from close family members. Consequently, their need for security, one of the most fundamental human needs, may remain unmet. Current living conditions may also hinder the fulfilment of other important needs, particularly those relating to love, belonging, and respect. Yet, as many scholars have argued, the importance of social relationships and interpersonal connectedness for the experience of ageing can hardly be overstated.

The expansive penetration of modern technologies into everyday life does not necessarily enhance older adults' sense of security (cf. Kotlarska-

Michalska, 1997; Wilkinson, 2008). The ubiquitous presence of computers and digital technologies, which have become indispensable elements of contemporary living, often constitutes a substantial barrier for members of the oldest generation. This, in turn, contributes to feelings of helplessness, social isolation, and loneliness among older adults. In many respects, digital technologies and the Internet continue to exclude a considerable proportion of older people from full participation in contemporary society. In this sense, they have become an important factor in processes of marginalisation and social separation among the oldest generation, a reality made particularly visible during the social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pikuła et al., 2020). Intergenerational conflict thus emerges as an important and widespread manifestation of a clash between cultural worlds. Older adults encounter this divide daily through difficulties in mastering technological innovations and adapting to the accelerating pace of contemporary change (Chutnik, 2007; Dzięgielewska, 2006; Giddens, 2008; *Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych w Polsce za 2024*, 2024; Putnam, 2009).

The generation entering old age at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has witnessed unprecedented cultural and civilisational change. The accelerating pace of life, the cult of youth, and rapid development of science and technology do not necessarily create conditions conducive to ageing. When far-reaching changes occur in systems of values, norms, and symbols (Szymański, 2014, p. 65), their consequences are often felt more acutely by older people, who may feel that their experience, wisdom, and accumulated knowledge are no longer valued. Scientific and technological revolutions, the spread of mass communication, and widespread access to information have reduced the dependence of younger generations on older adults as sources of knowledge and authority. As a result, older people have gradually lost their traditional role as custodians of knowledge and are often perceived as less socially useful because of declining physical strength and energy. The erosion of social prestige is inevitably accompanied by gradual marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream society (Kubicki, 2009; Kubicki & Olcoń-Kubicka, 2010; Wądłowska, 2010).

By contrast, those who have grown up in conditions of rapid and continuous social change have developed personal characteristics that facilitate adaptation to modernity. These include adaptability, self-confidence, belief in personal success as a key life goal, openness to innovation and technological progress, acceptance of diversity and cultural difference, tolerance towards alternative viewpoints, and a willingness to embrace change, including changes in value systems. In contemporary culture, personal worth is often measured through achievement, social status, and material success. Emphasis is placed on the pres-