polish sociological review 4(220)'22
ISSN 1231 – 1413
DOI:10.26412/psr220.07

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Senior Femininity and Senior Masculinity? Gender Identities of Elderly Women and Men in Poland

Abstract: This article presents the results of biographical research involving women and men over 60, with a focus on the issue of gender identity and how it changes during aging. The study provided answers to three main research questions: Are there distinguishable patterns of forming one's own gender identity that are specific to senior age, and if so, which ones? Do the patterns change during the ageing process, and if so, how? What determines how a person experiences the transformation of their gender identity in senior age? The article also discusses the ways elderly men and women define their own femininity or masculinity and the significance in this regard of such biographical experiences as losing a spouse, retirement, and bodily aging. There is also an attempt at a typology of senior femininities and senior masculinities.

Keywords: femininity, masculinity, gender identity, ageing, biographical research

Introduction

In 2020, people aged 60 and over accounted for 25.5% of Poland's total population. The elderly population itself is also aging rapidly, with 28% of the people categorized as old in 2020 being 75 years of age or older. Both these trends will also intensify in the coming years (Demographic Yearbook of Poland 2021: 136).

Although interest among social scientists usually follows demographic changes, in the field of Polish social gerontology, there is a distinct lack of analyses referring to the issue of the gender identity of the elderly.[1] Interestingly, however, the existence of gender-motivated "double standards" for the elderly in society has been pointed out since antiquity, as we can learn from the works of historians studying senior age (Bois 1996; Minois 1995). Such studies make it clear that the social position of elderly women and elderly men has differed fundamentally—while elderly men have generally enjoyed universal respect (motivated mainly by their life experience), elderly women have often faced social marginalization and criticism as a result of their loss of beauty and ability to bear children. The socially differentiated perception of male and female senior age is also pointed out by Adam Zych,

[1] In the Polish research tradition the problem of the linguistic categorization of the phenomenon of old age can be noted. Various terms, of a more or less euphemistic nature, are used to describe older people, e.g., elderly people, seniors, old people, people in the autumn of life, people of post-productive age, etc. (Burkacka 2014). This problem is difficult to solve, so throughout the text I use the terms senior people/women/men, elderly people/women/men, and aging people/women/men interchangeably.

who writes that "the dual standard of aging" means that elderly men are perceived as dominant, competitive, and in the "prime of life," or as "dignified old men tinged with metaphysical anxiety." Elderly women, on the other hand, are perceived as "insufferable, bitter, complaining grandmothers" or "old ladies in mohair berets" and, what is more, this is how they are treated, with indulgence, mocking smiles, or good-natured forbearance (Zych 2007: 146; own translation). Attempts have also been made to create a typology of the negative stereotypes that exist in Polish society with regard to elderly women. Researchers distinguish, *inter alia*, between the "urban type" ("a nosy neighbor from the block of flats"), the "rural type" ("an elderly woman in a headscarf, feeding the hens"), the "Church type" (the so-called "mohair berets") and the "plucky type" ("a grumpy elderly woman asking for her due privileges") (Cieślik, Zubik and Bańczarowska 2005). At the same time, the absence of analogous negative stereotyping of elderly men proves that despite the frequent omission of gender differences in research on senior age, the social image of elderly has its feminine and masculine dimensions. Senior women's and senior men's perception of these dimensions seemed to me worth exploring.

In recent years, several publications on the position of senior women in culture and society have appeared in Poland (Kowalewska and Grodzki 2019; Kuć 2016; Modrak 2015; Posłuszna 2017; Walęciuk-Dejneka 2016; Zierkiewicz and Łysak 2005 and 2006). These works, however, do not take into account the subjective perspective of elderly women; they are mainly focused on cultural representations of elderly women (their images in art, films, TV series, and advertisements). The results of this research also clearly indicate that "female" and "male" senior age are presented in different ways in culture and meet with different social reactions. Female aging evokes almost exclusively pejorative associations, mainly related to the fact that the possibility for women to fit the culturally dominant contemporary image of a beautiful, young, physically fit, and sexually attractive woman decreases with age (Czekańska-Mirek 2005; Sojka and Łyszkowska 2005; Solak 2011). One interesting study by Ewa Kępa (Kępa 2012) comprised the autobiographical narratives of elderly women. These narratives covered the complete biographical experience of women from a small town who were born before 1925. It is also worth drawing attention to Ewa Skibińska's study (Skibińska 2006) of the micro-worlds of elderly women, especially in regard to education, work, leisure time, and family.

Even less present in Polish research on senior age is the perspective of senior men—researchers have only sporadically addressed this topic (important studies on the issue were conducted, among others, by Urszula Kluczyńska (cf. Kluczyńska 2008, 2008a, 2010 and 2015). Researchers are beginning to become interested in the family roles played by elderly men—late fatherhood, the social role of the grandfather, (cf. Kościńska 2016; Siuta 2011; Rakoczy 2015), and how active men are after they retire (cf. Słowińska 2021). Analyses of masculinity in culture are generally undertaken less frequently than issues of femininity, and in general, unlike for women, do not differentiate between men on the basis of age. This may be indicative of the "social double standards" of aging discussed above, but it may also reflect different patterns of how femininity and masculinity are defined in senior age.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the distinction between male and female aging, if it is made, usually results from the domination of the so-called biomedical model—

aging is understood here primarily as a biological process to which the body is subject, in isolation from the emotional and cultural aspects of the phenomenon (e.g., Buczkowski 2005 and 2015). As a result, publications devoted exclusively to elderly women or men often focus only on the biological differences between them and their consequently varying medical conditions in senior age (Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2010; Ostrowska 2015). Publications distinguishing between "female" and "male" aging often deal with menopause[2] (much less frequently with andropause) and its various (mainly physiological) consequences (Mędraś and Bablok 2002; Bielawska-Batorowicz 2011; Markwitz-Grzyb 2012; Bień et al. 2017), cancers of the breast and female reproductive organs, and cancer of the prostate (Tobiasz-Adamczyk et al. 2016; Rogala and Dombrowska-Pali 2018). The dominance of issues related to the biological aspects of women's aging is apparent, while there is marginal interest in analogous processes in aging men.

The dominant perception of elderly people in sociological reflection as a sexually homogeneous age group (or even as an "asexual" population) has resulted in a significant research gap—the subjective perspective of elderly women and elderly men is almost completely ignored in research on senior age. Little is known in particular about the way elderly people define and experience their own femininity and masculinity, and about the dynamics and diversity of individual gender identity transformations in the process of becoming senior (in connection with earlier stages of life). The remainder of this article is devoted to discussing some of the findings of my qualitative biographical research focused on the gender identity of Polish senior citizens, with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. Are there distinguishable patterns of forming one's own gender identity that are specific to senior age, and if so, which ones?
2. Do that patterns transform during the ageing process, and if so, how?
3. What determines how a person experiences the transformation of their gender identity in senior age?

Definitions Adopted in the Research

The central concepts for further consideration are *gender identity* and *senior age*.

The multitude of theoretical gender concepts, varyingly understood as a range of concepts on a continuum between gender essentialism and constructivism (cf. e.g., Leszczyńska and Dziuban 2012), means that every researcher has to decide for themselves which gender concept to use in a specific research process. In my biographical research, the results of which are presented below, I adopted an understanding of gender that is situated at the intersection of the aforementioned theoretical trends—on the one hand, emphasizing its social and cultural roots, while at the same time taking into account its biological background, and treating gender as a complex of mechanisms (biological and social) that organize life in society. Similarly to Anna Titkow (2007: 28), I understand it as an ongoing process in which an individual's activity creates a gender that varies over time and is shaped

[2] The scientific periodical *Menopause Review* is devoted entirely to menopause and its various implications. There is no analogous publication that deals with the problems of andropause.

in specific social contexts. I have tried to pay attention to its multifaceted, heterogeneous, and time-varying nature at each stage of the research, which is why I have chosen a synthetic definition that encompasses biological as well as identity and structural determinants. At the same time, I am convinced of the intersectional nature of gender (e.g., Johnson 2005; Grabham et al. 2009) and I consider its relationship with structural categories such as social class.

Similarly, the concept of senior age is not uniformly defined in the social sciences. The lack of a clear caesura marking the beginning of senior age as a stage of life is connected with the nature of the ageing process, which takes place on many levels, including biological, psychological, and social. Research on senior age can also be characterized by the tension between essentialism and constructivism, and researchers can vary their emphasis, focusing more on either the biological (universal, although individually differentiated) or the social (culturally conditioned) side of this process.[3]

Given these definitional difficulties and the specificity and complexity of aging processes, in my opinion any boundary set by the researcher will be, to a greater or lesser extent, arbitrary. I took the decision to use the border of senior age recognized by the World Health Organization in my research, which considers the onset of senior age to occur after the age of sixty (e.g., Szarota 2013). Such a caesura, due to its relatively common use in research practice, makes it possible to place the results of research in the broader context of previous information about members of this age category and to formulate comparisons.[4]

The Biographical Method in Gender Identity Research

In 2017, I conducted biographical research on the dynamics of individual gender identity transformations over the course of an individual's life and the ways in which people over the age of sixty construct and experience their own femininity or masculinity.[5]

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[3] What is also interesting is that aging in its biological dimension—which is considered by many researchers to be the essence of human aging (by analogy with the aforementioned essentialist concepts of gender)—has quite a strong impact on the basis of sex: as people change with age, so among other things do their levels of female and male sex hormones and reproductive capabilities. The pace of these universal processes is individual, but their consequences are fundamentally different in women, who completely lose their fertility after menopause, and in men, in whom it decreases with age at different rates, but does not lead to such radical hormonal changes and cessation of reproductive functions as in women (e.g., Bielawska-Batorowicz 2011; Ostrowska 2010). The process of andropause is much less well studied than menopause, both in terms of its course from a medical point of view and its individual and cultural implications. (e.g., Boul 2003; Marshall 2007; Mędraś and Bablok 2002; Walaszek et al. 2017). It seems worth noting, however, that numerous studies indicate different menopausal symptoms in women of different nationalities, and researchers working on this issue point to the important role of cultural factors in shaping the course of menopause in women (Berger 1999; Freeman and Sherif 2007, Hall et al. 2007).The interweaving of the sphere of the body's biological processes, their individual experience and interpretation, and the related (broadly conceived) social implications both in relation to gender identity and aging, were among the factors that led me to formulate synthetic definitions of these phenomena, treating them as multidimensional and multifaceted processes to which the individual is subject.

[4] It is also justified in view of the possibility for women to retire formally at this age. I have chosen not to differentiate between the ages of women and men participating in the study, although a differentiated age of retirement for men and women was reinstated in Poland after the 2017 reform.

[5] The research was conducted in 2017, while the content analysis of biographical narratives was conducted in 2018–2019 and updated in 2022. Due to the nature of biographical research, the narratives covered the entire

The biographical method as a methodological orientation can provide a means for exploring a variety of sociological issues, provided biography is treated as a "means."[6] In the reconstruction of life experiences, I saw an opportunity to grasp individual definitions of femininity and masculinity, their formation in the course of life, and to grasp the dynamics of the transformation of gender identities among senior women and senior men (cf. Świątek-Młynarska 2019: 211). The theoretical and methodological background for my research is the biographical sociology of Fritz Schütze, within which the primary research interest is the individual's biography framed in narrative. Schütze considers the narrative interview to be an almost ideal tool for studying the dynamics of identity transformations, due to the fact that "by presenting their entire life, the storyteller expresses the basic order and structure of identity in their life as lived and experienced up to now and extended into the future yet to come" (cf. Schütze 2012: 152; own translation). In an autobiographical narrative story, the individual not only recounts the events in which they participated, but also their own inner transformations as a reaction to these experiences, thus giving access to the "evolving identity structure embedded in the individual's life story" (cf. Schütze 2012: 153; own translation). The narrative also allows us to discover the basic process structures of biographical experience, which, on the principle of homology, are reflected in the sequential structure of the narrative. This means that the biographical story reveals what happened in the social space from the viewpoint of the participant and the individuals acting in it, while the researcher is able to analyze the processual nature of these phenomena—their origin, development, and eventual end. However, this homology takes place on the condition that the researcher is dealing with a biographical narrative of a spontaneous nature (i.e., unprepared and unrehearsed beforehand) (Prawda 1989). The reconstruction of biographical process structures is made possible by the narrative interview technique developed by Fritz Schütze and his colleagues, and I discuss its principles in the part of the text dedicated to my research process.

The biographical method is sometimes criticized in sociology—most often due to the focus of this methodological approach on individual accounts and the study of a relatively small number of cases (compared to research using quantitative methods). Doubts are raised as to the possibility of formulating results on such general theoretical research. Florian Znaniecki is regarded as a pioneer of the biographical method, and in his works, which are highly respected in the sociological world, he relied on an in-depth analysis of a small number of biographies. For example, in *Miasto w świadomości jego obywateli* he analyses the narratives of 27 respondents (Znaniecki 1931), on the assumption that delving into the perspective of even a small number of social actors gives a fuller picture of social reality

life of the narrators. In this way, a dense, in-depth description of their life experiences was obtained. Due to the fact that the narrators' life stories and their subjective experiences are reflected in the narratives, the narrators' perspective on their own experiences can always be considered valid.

[6] Ingeborg Helling introduces an extremely important distinction between possible topics of biographical research, within which biography can be treated as a *means* (*biography as a means*) or as a *topic* (*biography as a topic*) (cf. Helling 1985). In the first sense, the study of biography allows the researcher to learn about various sociological issues (e.g., the issue of identity) from the perspective of a particular participant in social life, while in the second sense, the researcher is primarily interested in reconstructing typical sequences of events in the lives of specific groups of people and the meanings that these people give to these events (cf. Rokuszewska-Pawełek 2002).

than a more superficial examination of a larger number of cases. Biographical research (similarly to case study research) is characterized by a high degree of narrativity and reveals the complex nature of the social world. The "dense" description of a phenomenon created on the basis of such research is a cognitive tool that is as interesting for social theory as generalizations (understood as the possibility to assess the scale of a phenomenon in a population) (Flyvbjerg 2005). Another frequent criticism concerns the empirical status of the sources and the reliability of the information obtained through biographical interviews. Similarly to Agnieszka Bron, for example, I believe that researchers using the biographical method will have no reason to doubt the veracity of a narrator's life story, as they are focused on the processes occurring within the story and the meanings given to them, rather than on a strict reconstruction of the facts (Bron 2017)—the sociological veracity of a biographical account is constituted by its natural subjectivity (Kohli 2012). With regard to biographical research, the term "truth" should be replaced by "authenticity" (Helling 1985); on the other hand, an authentic biographical account is obtained in a spontaneous narrative, undisturbed by the researcher's interference.

Course of the Research

The appropriate selection of a sample is a considerable challenge for a researcher deciding to conduct a study using a biographical methodological orientation. The means of obtaining informants typical of other research methods often do not work in the case of narrative-biographical interviews (Schütze 2012). Above all, random selection is out of the question, especially in the context of the researcher's failure to strive for statistical representativeness, which is characteristic rather of quantitative research methods. Biographical narrative storytelling is complex in nature, and its weaving requires not only a significant effort from the research participant, but most importantly, a great deal of trust in the researcher. In my opinion, interviewees should therefore know why they have been selected to participate, what the purpose of the research is, what course it will take, how their biographical story will be used, and what kind of narrative is expected of them and why it is important to the researcher. In accordance with research practice within the biographical orientation, I decided on purposive sampling—this was motivated both by the research methodology and by the specificity of the social category I was investigating (e.g., the reluctance of senior citizens to take part in social research, especially a study in which the researcher asks for a time-consuming story about their entire life, abounding in personal details that could give rise to potential abuse). An additional problem is the varying state of health of elderly people, the generally low level of formal education among elderly people, and the possibility of a lack of understanding of what social research is (as well as shame or fear of disclosing that lack) and what the researcher (who after all has some institutional authority) actually expects (c.f. Świątek-Młynarska 2019 and 2019a[7]). Given

[7] I also refer to the issues considered in this research project in two other articles, in which I broadly discussed the ethical dilemmas in conducting biographical research (see Świątek-Młynarska 2019) and the difficulties in conducting biographical (or more broadly, qualitative) research with the participation of elderly people (see Świątek-Młynarska 2019a).

these difficulties, I used my own contacts to obtain initial informants and then used the snowball method (respondents to the survey referred me to further potential interviewees).[8]

The social category of elderly people is internally varied, both biologically and socially, including both the generation of people above 60 who are finishing their working career, as well as the generation of people over 75, whose situation in life is fundamentally different. Taking into account this heterogeneity (and the well-established research practice among gerontologists in this area, cf. Rowland 2009; Szarota 2010; Higgs and Gilleard 2015), I divided the sample into two parts (thirty biographical-narrative interviews each): the first group consisted of people aged between 60 and 74 (the so-called third age), while the second group consisted of people aged 75 and older (the so-called fourth age), thus making it possible to listen to narratives by representatives of both generations of elderly people. The sampling ensured equal representation of women and men. Despite the high feminization (increasing with age) of this social category, my aim was not to have the sample reflect the actual gender ratio present in the population but to reconstruct ways of experiencing one's femininity or masculinity—for this reason I was equally interested in male and female narratives. As emerged in the course of research, this was a number that allowed theoretical saturation—understood as the repetition of similar examples while no new ones appeared—to be achieved.

The research was carried out in various centers in the urban-rural continuum in the Silesian Voivodeship, in Bielsko-Biała, Żywiec, and Bielsko-Biała districts,[9] both in rural communes (agricultural and non-agricultural, located at different distances from the district town) and in towns of different sizes and population density and with different infrastructure. Due to my assumption of the intersectional nature of gender and gender identity, which is particularly strongly influenced by factors such as class, place of residence, and level of education, the research controlled for variables related to the location of the respondents in the social structure (place of residence and level of education) (cf. Świątek-Młynarska 2019: 211).

I made use of the biographical-narrative interview method discussed above, which consists of several phases (cf. Kaźmierska 1996). In the first phase, I was focused on explaining to the study participant the principles behind the research and the research problem, obtaining informed consent for participation in the research, and creating an atmosphere conducive to the participant's providing a narrative about their life (e.g., by explaining why they had been asked to participate in the study, and what experiences and stories from their life would be of particular interest to the researcher). In this phase, I also described how the research would proceed and I obtained permission to record the content

[8] This pattern of behavior provided me, as a researcher, with a high level of trust from potential interviewees, as my contact with a potential narrator was always mediated by someone who had already met me and who made my research actions credible, recommending contact with me as being safe. At the same time, all the people who took part in my research were strangers to me, and our contact was limited only to the autobiographical interview (and its organization and the possible passing on of contact details to further people who might take part in the research).

[9] Bielsko-Biała is a city with district rights, with a population of 170,000 inhabitants, and is the administrative, industrial, commercial, service, academic, and cultural center of the Bielsko-Biała agglomeration. It is also the seat of the Bielsko district authorities, with an urbanization rate of 27.8%, comprising one urban municipality, two urban-rural municipalities, and seven rural municipalities. Żywiec County consists of one urban and fourteen rural municipalities, with an urbanization rate of 20% (cf. GUS 2017).

of the interview (cf. Schütze 2012: 235–237).[10] The next phase involved encouraging participants to relate their life stories. Such an interview begins with specific instructions, which should be the same for all narrators (the instructions may vary in form but should have the same content every time) (cf. Hermanns 1987). The narrators were also informed that in the first phase of the research, the narrative was to be about their life as a whole, while only after this was finished would questions be asked that were directly linked to the research problem and the issues of interest to me; I also clearly stated that there was the option to refuse to answer certain questions. After the introduction, the main part of the interview began, that is, a free narrative about the participant's whole life uninterrupted by the researcher. In each case, I asked for a free description of their entire life, emphasizing that I was interested in the issues that the narrator considered to be important. I made them aware that we had as much time for the narrative as they needed, which they could develop as they wished (including from a chronological perspective), and that after this part I would move on to asking questions about issues that were of particular interest to me. After the autobiographical account, I moved on to the question phase. Gabrielle Rosenthal divides this into so-called internal and external narrative questions, and I found this division extremely helpful in later analysis of the narrative. Initially, the researcher limits themselves to internal questions, relating directly to the autobiographical account. Only in the next stage are external questions asked, relating to topics not yet explored and directed toward the research problem (cf. Rosenthal 2012). The external questions centered around issues such as how femininity and masculinity are defined, the socialization of gender roles, changes in femininity and masculinity through life, the relations between female or male identity and the aging process, and the biological, emotional, and social aspects of being a woman or a man in the context of the narrator's life experiences.

Analysis of the empirical material used a synthesis between the etic and emic[11] approaches. The result of a perspective that assumes the role of the researcher as an external observer is an a priori conceptualization of the research, as well as later analysis and coding of the research material. The pattern for analyzing the interview content was based on theory and was primary in relation to the experiences of the study participants—both the questions asked during the interviews and the means by which the material was analyzed were based on the theoretical principles of research questions (Gibbs 2011). Nevertheless, during the analysis I was open to the sense and meanings created by the narrators, allowing for modification of the adopted principles and means of analyzing the research material. Therefore, the coding of the material consisted of extracting various categories from the research material, and assigning names and concepts to the description of social reality

[10] In recent years, two texts on ethics in qualitative research (cf. Bielska 2016; Świątek-Młynarska 2019) and a text on ethics in ethnographic research (cf. Fine 2010) have appeared, indicating that honestly informing respondents/narratives about the aim of the research is one of the unsolvable ethical dilemmas faced by social scientists. This task can be performed better or worse, but achieving the ideal is extremely difficult. As Beata Bielska writes, "concealment practices" (including hiding the purpose of research/all or part of the research questions/hypotheses, etc.) are an inherent part of every research process, because it is impossible to inform the respondents about all aspects of the planned research process.

[11] These categories were introduced into linguistic anthropology by Kenneth L. Pike in his book *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (cf. Pike 1967). They reflect the way in which a particular culture is studied: an emic research stance means analyzing the culture from the position of a participant, while an etic view means analyzing it from the position of an external observer.

contained in the research material (Konecki 2000: 48–55). In the next stage, I combined the various categories, compared them, and looked for similarities and differences. I tried to follow both the main research questions (based in theory), as well as categories that came to light during coding (thus combining the theoretical and empirical layers) (Dziuban 2013: 385–392; Leszczyńska 2016: 128–147). This research approach, which is close to the contrastive comparison phases and theoretical model creation in Fritz Schütze's concept, enabled me to create a typology and formulate conclusions of a very general nature.

The research revealed the ways in which elderly women and men create their own gender identity, and the subsequent analysis enabled the creation of a typology of the most common patterns of "senior femininity" and "senior masculinity."

Ways in Which Elderly People Define Femininity and Masculinity

The main conclusion from the research is that there is a fundamental difference between senior women and senior men in the construction of their own gender identity. While senior women formulate various definitions of femininity, emphasizing its various attributes, senior men, regardless of the diversity of their life stories and attitudes, formulate a similar and relatively stable definition of masculinity. For them, masculinity means above all responsibility for the family, both materially and spiritually—a definition shared by almost all my male narrators (and most of the female narrators), and which they had no major problems in formulating. Interestingly, this perception of masculinity is formed quite early and shows limited movement over the life course. This is an observation that I find particularly interesting in the context of stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (which have been well described in the literature) and cultural images of men and women (especially in senior age). Research shows that in Poland, women are mainly attributed with qualities associated with the role of a mother—warmth, tenderness, sensitivity, as well as gentleness and the ability to make sacrifices (Kopciewicz 2005). This vision of a woman places her in the private sphere and makes her responsible for taking care of the home and loved ones, thus realizing the three aspects of love, marriage, and motherhood (Titkow, Duch-Krzysztoszek and Budrowska 2004). It also has an impact on the worse situation (compared to men) of women in the labor market, as women are only secondarily (after their role of mother and wife) perceived as valuable employees (Bałdys and Geisler 2006; Domański 1999; Gawrycka, Wasilczuk and Zwiech 2007; Titkow 2003).

According to the stereotypical message, women's identity is primarily shaped in relation to their family roles, whereas research results show a much stronger relation between masculinity and the family role, where the role of "head of the family" includes the role of husband/partner as well as of being a father and grandfather. There are also three activities considered by both male and female narrators to be attributes of masculinity: sexual activity, driving a car, and responsibility for heating the household (burning coal in the stove or programming a gas boiler). The issue of the meanings attributed to these spheres of "male" activity is discussed in more detail later in the text.

At the same time, the definitions of femininity formulated by men are not as unambiguous, just as the attributes of femininity that they distinguish are diversified: femi-

ninity is defined from the perspective of family roles (mother, wife), but also character traits/activities undertaken (affectionate, supportive, empathetic, warm) or physical attributes (pretty, shapely, attractive, "feminine"). As I mentioned earlier, the definitions formulated by women are also diverse and refer to various spheres of life: femininity can be identified with motherhood, but also with beauty ("to be a woman is to be always pretty, elegant") or (extremely diverse) character traits: some women identify femininity with being empathetic, tender, and compassionate, others with being tough, resilient, and decisive ("the neck that turns the head of the family"). Women are also much more likely to have problems verbalizing what it means for them to be a woman, to be much less sure of their answers, and to admit that they have never thought about it.

Biographical Experiences and Elderly People's Experience of Femininity and Masculinity

Female identity changes and evolves over the course of life in conjunction with various experiences (e.g., marriage, motherhood, widowhood) and is characterized by much greater dynamics and fluidity compared to male identity. The narrators' redefinition of their female gender identity was, however, not only linked to the process of aging, but also to various biographical events, such as the birth of a child (or loss of the chance of having one), or entering or ending a marriage, as well as to the experience of illness (one's own or a loved one's) or death in the immediate family. The way we define our femininity and masculinity changes during aging in such a way that senior women redefine their femininity based on the new family and social roles they perform, while men try to maintain their existing definition of their masculinity.

The biographical stories provided by the female and male narrators clearly show that the one-dimensional, stereotypical image of senior men and (especially) senior women does not reflect a nuanced social reality, while the stereotypes of women's senior age depict only a small part of the social reality of seniors, which so far is very poorly understood. Although many definitions of masculinity reconstructed in research literature revolve around opposition to the opposite sex (cf. e.g., Badinter 1993; Deux and Lewis 1984), senior men constructed their own definition based primarily on their social roles and bodily attributes (masculinity is identified with sexual prowess, physical prowess).

[…] in my understanding, to be a man is to be a lightning conductor, the roof over the building, and a guardian of the home. Not in the sense of everyday, small things, but above all in giving a basic sense of security, so the family simply has a refuge, so that even in such difficult situations […] to stand up and defend the family (M, 70 years old, university degree, living in a village approx. 25 km from a district town).

Once a friend of mine, who was a superman, a womanizer, […] he said, 'You know what, once it stops working for me, I won't want to live anymore; I won't need to live anymore. So, for him, to be a man was to have sexual prowess. I fear it too—that if it fades, and it will, no doubt, because it is different with women. A woman can do it for the rest of her life and wants to for the rest of her life, which is interesting. It is different for men. Maybe they want to, but they can't […] But being a man means having a woman and having satisfaction from contact with her (M, 78 years old, secondary education, city with 5,500 inhabitants).

Analysis of the narrators' statements also leads to the conclusion that femininity is much less connected with patterns provided by the social environment (important women

and important men in one's life, family, cultural messages). It shows greater dynamics in the course of life, women adapt faster to social and moral changes and accept them with more enthusiasm—the majority of the senior women participating in the study positively evaluated the emancipation of women, delayed maternity, greater partnership in performing household duties, and most of all, they appreciate the possibility for women to control their own fertility and the decrease in social pressure related to entering into marriage quickly.

In my day what was it like? 'Oh Lord, a girl alone with a baby, oh Jesus, what's this?'—the whole village was talking. Now it's normal. I consider it a normal thing […]. Because if my parents had said to me, 'You know what, you're pregnant, you don't have to get married, we'll help you raise the baby,' then maybe my life would have turned out differently. As this was unthinkable for them at the time, I had to pay for my mistakes (W, 62 years old, vocational education, city of over 100,000 inhabitants).

The theme of universal access to contraception was raised frequently in the interviews. Many women indicated that they appreciated and approved of the change in social patterns regarding entering into marriage, and the emergence of social acceptance of cohabitation before marriage, because they themselves had suffered for a significant part of their lives from the consequences of not-always-correct choices in their youth. Many of the women in the study entered into marriage very young, usually under pressure from their families, out of fear of possible stigmatization caused by the possibility of having a child before marriage. These women were positive about the changes in social expectations for young women (e.g., the possibility to decide on one's own if and when one wants to have a child) and also about changes in the scope of male roles. The women approved of the individual negotiation of household duties or involved fatherhood—experiences which were relatively rare for them. These observations are consistent with the conclusions drawn by Ewa Kępa from the biographical narratives of elderly women in her above-mentioned research (Kępa 2012).

At the same time, most of the men participating in the study were attached to the patriarchal family model, and even if they functioned outside of it on a daily basis (e.g., performing part of the household duties, taking care of an ill spouse), they evaluated it positively and believed that masculinity and femininity are most fully realized within such a framework. This perception of masculinity was formed quite early in life and shows considerable resistance to change—in this context, the environment of initial socialization seems much more important than the one in which an senior man is currently functioning.

I mean, I'm a typical country man, one who was brought up in the spirit that a man's job was to work the land, while kitchen matters were always taken care of by a woman. And this sometimes takes its toll, because…I mean, my wife also has a certain resentment towards me, because when you live in the countryside, there's a completely different division of roles, whereas when you live in M [a flat—author's note] well, you get locked into it and are left in the kitchen, while the man sits at the computer or in front of the television. These qualities are in me (M, 77 years old, university education, resident of a city with over 100,000 inhabitants).

A consequence of this rigid definition of masculinity is that senior women and senior men react differently to the experience of losing a spouse or caring for a sick spouse. The loss of a spouse is usually a very difficult experience for men, not only in terms of the emotional suffering caused by the loss, but also in terms of having to fulfil the responsibilities hitherto performed by the woman.

Even in terms of cooking, it's over, I'm crippled, really, it's because I was just so spoilt. I mean, I helped, it's not that I didn't help my wife, it's just that I was more involved in my job. […] I didn't even […] know where we

kept…Where the forks and knives were, I knew that, but where the bedding was, where the…I didn't know where anything was in the house, really […] I didn't even know where my…Winter shoes were hidden somewhere so that… I just didn't know anything (M, 67 years old, university education, living in a village 20 km from a district town).

The content of the narratives is consistent with the results of previous observations by foreign researchers (Peters and Liefbroer 1997; Alpass and Nevile 2003; Bennett, Huges and Smith 2003), indicating that the traditional division of household responsibilities makes the experience of losing a spouse much more difficult for men. At the same time, those senior women who evaluated their marriage negatively, mentioning that it was entered too early and under social pressure, were tired of the traditional division of roles, of combining paid work with motherhood (which was often impossible to plan), as well as of experiencing various forms of violence in their relationships or struggling with the problem of their spouse's addiction, in addition to emotional difficulties. These women pointed to the positive aspects of widowhood, related to obtaining personal freedom (often for the first time in their lives), and the possibility of self-determination, as evidenced by the following quotes:

I have peace of mind. And as a result, these are now the best times I have ever had in my life. I do what I want (W, 76 years old, vocational education, town of 5,500 inhabitants).

Freedom. However, it was amazing that when I went out, went into town, it was like Jesus, Maria, I don't have to rush, I don't have to, and I could just walk. And I thought to myself, well now I'm going to walk around the city, I'm going to walk, and walk, and walk. Yes, because it was endless—Mother of God, I just had to catch the bus, I had to get home, because if I didn't, my husband hated it so much—if I was a bit late or something—it was unthinkable. And now, I have no stress at all (W, 75 years old, secondary education, resident of city over 100,000 inhabitants).

It is also interesting to note that women react differently to men to the changes brought about by aging—the end of professional activity, changes in family roles, changes in the physical sphere. While for senior women the end of working life often brings a respite from too many responsibilities and a chance to organize their lives anew, for most men retirement is a difficult event—the majority of my narrators tried to continue working (despite reaching retirement age), even if only part time. There was also a theme in the narratives of being in a worse mood, of depression and even suicidal thoughts associated with leaving the workforce, which significantly more often affected men. This is related to the fact that professional work is given different meanings in the course of life—for women, it was more often an economic necessity and was important above all in terms of social relations ("being among people," "being needed"), while for men it was the core of their identity, which was focused on being a carer and breadwinner and the desire to succeed in this sphere of life. The different approach to leaving the labor force is illustrated by the following example quotes:

Suddenly […] there's just you, lying in bed, so it's good, it's cool, I can sleep—but I can't, because I don't want to anymore. And this day after day is pretty much the same and it kills you. Some are happy to have retired. I was not happy. It is only now that I appreciate what it means to be free, […]before that, my nature was to be rebellious (M, 70 years old, university education, resident of a city over 100,000 inhabitants).

[…] I just didn't see the difference between working and being retired. Because I sewed, cleaned, did the chores, gardened, I simply did not feel retired (W, 80 years old, secondary education, living in a village about 10 km from a county town).

The end of working life often gives women more freedom, allowing them to rediscover their identity and express it more fully in the public space, while the same situation usually requires men to completely rebuild their identity. For many men, the inability to continue working results in a complete withdrawal from the public to the private sphere (Kluczyńska 2008a). The need to be active is then realized, for example, by taking care of the garden or the allotment. It is also extremely important and identified as an attribute of masculinity to take care of heating the home—a frequently mentioned "masculine" activity is burning coal in the stove (especially in non-urban environments, where coal heating is still dominant).

In my research, I have assumed from the outset that gender identity is only one of many human identities and that it manifests itself with varying intensity at different points in life. Thanks to the division of the sample into groups of the so-called "young old" and "old old," it was possible to observe how people's attitude to their own femininity or masculinity changed at various stages of aging and of senior age. Analysis of the autobiographical narratives indicates that with age, female identity loses importance in a gradual way, and among elderly women (those over 80) it is of little significance, as care for their own health, and (in very many cases) their religious identity, in connection with reflections on passing away and spiritual preparation for death, are most important. Among men, on the other hand, the validity of their masculine identity is independent of age, but strongly linked with their role as head of the family and with physical vigor. For this reason, male activities in senior age usually differ little from those in earlier stages of life (work, physical and sexual activity, stereotypically "masculine" domestic and family responsibilities), while women's roles and dominant identities vary over time.

It is difficult to demonstrate a link between the way people experience their femininity/masculinity and their level of education. As far as the place of residence is concerned, in senior age it does not have a significant connection with the transformation of individual gender identity, while the place of origin is of great importance for its formation (men coming from poorly urbanized areas are more often supporters of the patriarchal model of masculinity, while women more often experienced social pressure related to an unwanted pregnancy and forced marriage, in which they remained due to fear of social ostracism in a small community).

The Aging Male and Female Body

I find the attitude of women to aging in the bodily dimension extremely interesting. While the literature on the subject emphasizes the negative stereotyping of senior women that results, among other things, from their loss of beauty, the narratives of the women present aging as a process which may be unpleasant but which simultaneously liberates the female body from the cultural regime of being eternally young and attractive. The physical signs of aging (e.g., wrinkles, changes in figure, graying hair, the cessation of menstruation) are mostly seen as something natural and accepted; being an senior woman allows one to "be oneself"—it is a release from the compulsion to be physically attractive all the time. Beauty does not cease to be important, but it becomes something personal rather than social, and female identity is transformed but does not disappear.

[…] I even have a little fun with this old age. So what if I look pathetic? So what if I have to go to the hairdresser and spend my pennies on getting my hair done […] so as not to look frightening […]. So you have to take care of yourself a little bit, but basically, as I said, nothing scares me in my old age, not even the fact that my whole spine needs work […] I'm happy about it, […] not everyone sees old age as God's punishment—no, just asexually. Look, there goes an old person. The only thing is that maybe some women will have the opportunity be more human (W, 78 years old, university education, town with 5,500 inhabitants).

The male body is subject to cultural regimes to a much greater extent. The narrators focused in their narratives on the identification of masculinity with physical robustness and attractiveness, sexual prowess and the ability to drive a car, and for them true senior age is connected with the loss of these physical attributes of masculinity (male identity is then extinguished, which is expressed in declarations such as "I have not been a man for some time now").

I think this is related to the fact that women always want to look nice, but later in life men just don't. Because it seems to me that when they find out they just can't be such a hundred-percent man, then they just don't take care of themselves, because they don't care anymore. And a woman, after all, if you come and kiss her hand, or give her a flower, or do something, they still make an effort and it shows. Not for some typical purposes, like sleeping together or something, but they just want to be treated like they are pretty, that they are still worth something, they strive for it. Just no sexual overtones. Because men very rarely… (W, 63 years old, university education, resident in a village approx. 10 km from a district town).

These observations coincide with the conclusions of foreign researchers into the corporeality of aging women and men. First, the attitudes of senior women to the bodily changes associated with senior age are far better studied than the analogous processes in men. This does not mean, however, that the aging male body is not subject to any pressure, but only that this pressure is sometimes ignored by researchers, and it occurs and is focused mainly on the expectation that men should preserve their developed musculature and physical vigor for as long as possible (Bieńko 2018; Kostanski, Fisher and Gullone 2004; McCabe and Ricciardelli 2004). At the same time, senior age is a stage when the female body is gradually liberated from social expectations, and although women's satisfaction with their own appearance declines sharply in middle age, it stabilizes around 60 years of age and is higher than the self-esteem of men in similar age groups (Robins, Trzesniewski, Tracy, Gosling and Potter 2002; Baker and Gringart 2009). In the process of aging, women begin to place more importance on their health and the functional capacity of their body, focusing less on the pressures of maintaining beauty or sexual attractiveness. This is not to say that these lose importance entirely, but they are moved from the public to the private sphere and are not subject to judgment, which many women describe as a liberating experience, as they can finally take care of themselves for themselves and not out of fear of judgment by others (Engeln 2018; Hofmeier, Runfola, Sala, Gagne, Brownley, Bulik 2017; Czarnecka 2018).

Senior Femininities and Senior Masculinities—an Attempt at a Typology

Examples of varied biographically oriented research have shown that during analysis of the various autobiographical narratives content it may emerge that there are only limited types of biography (e.g., Bron 2017; Thomas and Znaniecki 1976).

During analysis of the content obtained from the narratives of elderly women and men, I noticed that the autobiographical experiences of senior women and men can be grouped based on several features that were repeated in the narratives, creating types of real "senior femininity" and "senior masculinity" (extracted from the empirical data). The typology thus created is descriptive in character and encompasses the vast amount of biographical material collected. This approach made it possible to move beyond the individual narrative, revealing the weight attributed by the narrators to their own biographical experiences in forming what they understood to be "being a woman" and "being a man." The creation of very general types also enabled a more synthetic description of this segment of social reality. I selected several repeating features which I had identified after multiple analyses of the content collected during the narrative analysis; I compared the narratives to one another and looked for similarities and differences in order to verify whether the narratives matched one another (and in what respects) (cf. Urbaniak-Zając 2017).

In the case of the women's narratives, common features could be found in terms of family and marriage experiences, the means of defining femininity, their relation to their place in society, professional experience, and their attitude toward aging. On the basis of these features, I was able to distinguish several types of "senior femininity."

I described the first type as "liberated." These are usually single women who have had the experience of an unhappy marriage. As I mentioned above, they often entered marriage at a young age, without knowing their partner well, under pressure from their family or community due to being pregnant. In marriage, they were faced with the hardship of running a home and raising children without support from their partner (and without the ability to control their own fertility effectively), often combined with not very satisfying paid work. It was not uncommon for them to be victims of emotional, financial, or even physical abuse. For them, senior age is a period of freedom, peace, and self-fulfillment—of liberation from previous social roles and the expectations that accompanied them. They are not interested in entering into new relationships; they focus on themselves, pursuing their passions and needs. They indicate that they were socialized to meet male needs, which were placed above their own, and from which senior age represents a liberation. They identified femininity with motherhood and built their female identity around it. In this group, the predominant view is that women and men differ both in the content of their social roles and in social expectations in regard to them, as well as innately—in their opinion, women are by nature more caring, emotional, and oriented toward satisfying the care needs of people close to them (children, husband, elderly parents), while men are more rational.

The second type are "family fulfilled" women. Most often they are in a successful relationship, are satisfied with their lives, and build their identity around satisfaction with life as a whole (making the right choices, building satisfying interpersonal relationships). They are strongly focused on family roles, often having an important role within the family. They identify femininity with being helpful and needed; helping is for them a central activity and a source of self-esteem. Focusing on family roles and providing help makes corporeality less important to them; they are more satisfied with their bodies and accept the changes caused by aging. It is not uncommon for them to be economically active and for work to be primarily a source of interpersonal contact. They are advocates of the sharing

of responsibilities between partners, and they believe that differences between people are not rooted in gender, but in individual predispositions.

The third type are "independently fulfilled." Most are widows, or divorced or unmarried women. They have built their identity around their working life and prioritized self-reliance and independence. Family ties are important to them, but they maintain their autonomy. They fulfil caring roles to a limited extent, and their relationship with their children and grandchildren is egalitarian. They are focused on pursuing their own passions and interests, while comfort and taking care of their own needs (including sexual needs) are important to them. The bodily sphere is important to them and they take great care of it. For them, femininity is about being the guiding force in the family, about causality, about "being the neck that turns the head of the family."

The fourth type are "incomplete." These are women who have not started a family, often as a reaction to various types of trauma suffered in childhood. Although they do not have children themselves, they build their female identity around the role of wife and mother, excluding themselves from women as a group (they describe themselves as "incomplete" or even "tomboys"). They see the experience of motherhood as the essence of femininity, which they themselves have not had the opportunity to experience. At the same time, they are not attached to bodily attributes of femininity, such as wearing dresses or putting on make-up. They clearly emphasize the different social norms that apply to men and women, considering men to be privileged. Often their aspirations in life or education were curtailed at the expense of their brothers, who enjoyed greater privileges in the family (fewer household chores, more leisure time, greater investment in education). It is important for them to have a satisfying working life and to set ambitious professional goals for themselves (or even to compete with men in the professional sphere in order to prove their worth).

The last type is "withdrawing." These are mostly women in their 80s, who are resigned to their own passing. Their once extensive social and family contacts are now reduced to their immediate environment, and they are recipients of help and support rather than providers of it. Focused on memories and spiritual/religious life, they are preparing for death and taking stock of life. They self-identify as "elderly women" who now live only for themselves.

At the same time, on the basis of analysis of the content of the narratives, it is clear that the most important feature distinguishing types of "senior masculinity" is sexual prowess, and on that basis, two types can be distinguished: "a man" and "no longer a man." Being a man is conditional on fulfilling the caring role of head of the family and is identified with sexual prowess. If either of these conditions is not met, senior men describe themselves as "no longer men" or "men only in the biological sense."

Due to differently distributed emphasis within the first type, the following subtypes were distinguished on the basis of attitudes to fulfilling the social roles considered to be female and male. The first is the "lost" man. Most often a widower, he finds it difficult to find his way in daily life, which his wife was responsible for organizing. He is forced to redefine his masculinity due to the lack of a partner (and the related need to take up activities considered feminine). However, some men in this group do not redefine their own definition of masculinity, but look for a female career (a daughter, daughter-in-law, or new partner) who can take over "non-masculine" responsibilities. The second type is the

"macho" type, who builds his sense of masculinity around his sexual prowess. The axis of identity for men of this type is sexual attractiveness and physical prowess, and their activity focuses on maintaining these masculine attributes for as long as possible. The third type is the "head of the family," who realizes his masculinity primarily through taking care of his family (his wife, partner, children, grandchildren). For men who focus on their role as head of the family, taking care of—for example—a sick partner is less of a problem. They do not regard care as an attribute of femininity, but as an expression of masculinity. Conversely, the "torn" type is fit and active but forced by life circumstances to care for a sick partner, and is consequently torn between how he would like to fulfil himself and a limiting sense of duty. These are men who build their masculinity around independence, but who are forced to incorporate elements identified with femininity into their identity (caring for the sick), which creates tension and a kind of dissonance for them.

Summary

The findings discussed above demonstrate the usefulness of the biographical perspective in the study of female and male identities and the dynamics of their transformation during life, including during aging, which was an issue of particular interest for me. Analysis of the biographical and narrative interviews revealed multiple and nuanced "senior femininities" and "senior masculinities." In particular, elderly people's definitions of femininity turned out to be much more diverse than the literature on stereotypes of femininity would suggest. In my opinion, it is crucial in research to take into consideration the subjective perspective of senior men, as their viewpoint has been less well investigated to date than the experiences of women. The findings also throw interesting light on the stereotypes associated with senior age (as mentioned above, the subjective perspective of elderly people is not common in research on senior age, especially in Poland). This seems to me an extremely important perspective, opening up possibilities for further research, discussion, and comparison, both in the Polish and international context.

Funding

The author worked on this text within the framework of research grant number 2013/11/N/HS6/01101 (contract number UMO-2013/11/N/HS6/01101) funded by the National Science Centre, Poland.

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