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## **PREDICTORS OF SENSE OF SELF-DIGNITY IN LATE ADULTHOOD.**

### **A SYNTHESIS OF OWN RESEARCH.**

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#### **Summary**

**Objectives:** The results of the research carried out by the Authors were presented in this article. People (N = 315) in late adulthood (60–75 years old) participated in the research. Its primary goal was to identify the predictors of the sense of self-dignity. Their distinction was supported by L. Tornstam theory of gerotranscendence.

**Methods:** Four psychological methods were applied in the discussed project, namely: (1) Questionnaire of Sens of Self-Dignity (QSSD-3); (2) Religious Meaning System Scale (RMSS); (3) Life Review Questionnaire (LRQ); (4) Marital Offence-Specific Forgiveness Scale (MOFS).

**Results:** The analyzes revealed that among the distinguished psychological variables, the role of the predictor of sense of self-dignity in late adulthood is fulfilled by the religious meaning system and the positive dimension of forgiveness in marriage.

**Conclusions:** The transformations of the spiritual and social dimension of the elderly's life, postulated by the theory of gerotranscendence, suggest that religiousness and willingness to forgive can serve as supporting factors for building and committing the sense of self-dignity in this group of people. The findings obtained in the research may be a significant back-up for psychologists and therapists while defining ways of therapeutic actions taken towards the elderly people whose overall and adequate sense of self-dignity assessment may deteriorate along with negative changes connected with aging

#### **Introduction**

One of the burning problems many countries of the world and Europe have to face today - including Poland - is the dynamically progressing process of aging of the population [1]. As a result, we are seeing an increase in the number of elderly people in the global population [2]. This implies the necessity of undertaking many interdisciplinary activities, aimed not only at raising the quality of life of seniors, but also at creating the optimal conditions for personal development for the elderly [3]. It can be considered that the main purpose of these activities is to provide people entering the last phase of life with multiple help in aging with dignity [4]. In addressing the problem of aging, we naturally touch the issue of the dignity of a person, which on the one hand can be treated in terms of properties (inalienable value) describing man also at the last stage of his life, and on the other hand as a force (a psychic resource) motivating to continuous effort of development - overcoming difficulties arising with age and shaping the right attitude towards oneself, other people and the surrounding reality [5]. It is worth emphasizing that in the period of old age, the realization of personal dignity is associated not

only with making important life decisions and new social roles, but also with experiencing loneliness, diseases, disability, the need to get care or the near death perspective [3, 6].

In the opinion of H. Sęk and A. Brzezińska, "the subject of a dignified life is considered in psychology too rarely, and it is worth discovering its old and new meaning [...]. One can live with dignity in health and illness, in youth and in the last years of life "[7, p. 7]. The quoted statement points to the necessity of undertaking psychological research on human dignity and identifies various areas of exploration of the discussed issue. One of them is undoubtedly the area related to the psychology of aging and old age [3, 8].

It should be noted that the issue of human dignity is the subject of research and analysis mainly in such areas of science as philosophy (anthropology), theology or law [9, 10]. Within these disciplines, the accent is stressed mainly on natural and / or supernatural (personal) dignity, which is due to every human being from the very fact of being a human being [11]. Such a way of addressing the problem of dignity definitely goes beyond the scope of psychological research (more broadly social sciences). Academic psychologists focus on the issue of the sense of self-dignity [12].

On the basis of psychology, the sense of dignity can be understood and interpreted in various ways [13]. The presented article is based on the definition of Z. Płużek and S. Steuden, according to which the sense of self-dignity is a complex construct within which three basic dimensions can be distinguished: (1) self-respect based on the possessed and recognized hierarchy of values and consistent with it behavior; (2) trust in oneself and the ability to take difficult and responsible life tasks; (3) full self-acceptance assuming awareness of strengths and weaknesses [3].

The sense of self-dignity, like any psychological variable, has its specific determinants and remains in relation to other properties of the human psyche. As a result, we can talk about protection factors (raising, supporting, maintaining) the sense of self-dignity, as well as risk factors that posing a real threat to a person's sense of dignity. It should be emphasized that the possibility of revealing (activating) these factors, their nature, type and the strength with which they interact largely depend (also) on the stage of development on which the individual is on a given time (stage of life) [14]. In order to identify correlates and predictors of self-esteem that are typical of late adulthood, it is worth referring to one of theories of adaptation to old age (positive aging) by Swedish researcher Lars Tornham - theory of gerotranscendence [15, 16].

According to the assumptions of the theory, gerotranscendence is a process in which a person redefines time, space, life and death, himself, his place in society, family, human group and interpersonal relationships. Its consequence is a change in the metaperspective in the perception of reality from materialistic and rational to more cosmic (metaphysical, spiritual). Maturation to gerotranscendence is most often associated with an increase in life satisfaction and the emergence of a new psychic quality in the form of wisdom [17]. Gerotranscendent changes are visible in three main areas of psychosocial functioning of the person: cosmic dimension, personality (self-dimension) and social (social and relationship dimension). Their manifestation is the redefinition of basic spiritual and existential problems, a change in the perception of one's own person and, consequently, also of one's own life (own self) and re-evaluation of relations with others [16].

Referring to the assumptions of the theory of gerotranscendence, as well as to the results of research based on the concept of L. Tornstam [18], it can be assumed that important factors "affecting" the sense of dignity of people in late adulthood are: religiosity - spiritual level,

life review - the level of self and forgiveness of the spouse - the level of social relations [19]. Transformations that manifest themselves on the cosmic / metaphysical level of gerotranscendence result in the opening of the individual to the rich world of the spirit. As a result, religion and the spiritual sphere are an important element of life for the elderly [17]. The development towards gerotranscendence identified at the personality level is expressed, among others, in the readiness to confront oneself and one's own history on the way of evaluating the current life - life balance [16, 20]. The person goes back to the earlier periods of his life - to what was and what has gone forever - and discovers new aspects of his own self (covering the whole life of the individual), both good and bad. This discovery does not entail an overwhelming sadness, but leads to self-acceptance and building an integrated vision of the past life [21]. In turn, as a result of gerotranscendent changes manifesting at the level of social references, an increased need of redefining the existing interpersonal relationships appears in seniors [17]. Thus, the marital relationship is primarily gaining importance [19, 22]. The key aspect of the retrospective assessment as well as the current experience (nurturing) is forgiveness [23, 24]. A look at a long-term relationship from the perspective of time allows to recognize that what once was the subject of harm and suffering, today -subjected to redefinition - can become an object of forgiveness, which will strengthen the bond between spouses [19].

Referring to the above analyzes, as well as taking into account the results of previous research in the area of the sense of dignity, the main research goal of the presented project was to answer the question: Do and to what extent selected psychological variables (religiosity, life balance, forgiveness) explain the variability of results in the area of self-esteem?

### **Method**

#### **The studied group.**

315 people (156 women and 159 men) aged 60-75 participated in the research project. In the group of men, the average age reached the level  $M = 66.46$  with a standard deviation  $SD = 5.24$ . In turn, in the group of women, the value of  $M = 64.94$  ( $SD = 4.77$ ) was obtained. All subjects were married. Respondents differed in their place of residence, their education, professional status and currently or previously occupied job position. The selection of the sample was deliberate. The author of the presented project was interested in the fact that in the group of respondents there were those who would "provide optimal information from the point of view of the purpose of the study" [25, p. 30]. More detailed data is presented in Table 1

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the examined sample**

The name of the variable		The whole group		Men		Women	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age		65.71	5.07	67.43	5.03	65.38	4.65
		N	%	n	%	n	%
Place of residence	Village	53	16.8	27	17.0	26	16.7
	Small town	75	23.8	38	23.9	37	23.7
	Medium city	91	28.9	45	28.3	46	29.5
	Big city	96	30.5	49	30.8	47	30.1
Education	Basic	41	13.0	21	13.2	20	12.8
	Vocational	55	17.5	33	20.8	22	14.1
	Secondary	129	41.0	61	38.3	68	43.6
	Higher	90	28.5	44	27.7	46	29.5
Professional status	Works	86	26.7	47	29.6	39	25.0
	Does not work (retirement)	229	73.3	112	70.4	117	75.0
Workplace	Workers / production	92	29.2	53	33.3	39	25.0
	Clerical / administrative	59	18.7	16	10.1	43	27.6
	Teacher	35	11.1	6	3.8	29	18.6
	Management / executive	66	21.0	49	30.8	17	10.9
	Other	63	20.0	35	22.0	28	17.9

### Research tools

Four psychological tools were used in the study. Characterization of the explained variable - the sense of self-dignity - was made using Questionnaire of Sens of Self-Dignity (Kwestionariusz Poczucia Własnej Godności - KPWG-3), constructed by S. Steuden and P. Brudek. KPWG-3 is composed of 36 statements forming 4 dimensions: Cognition, Loss, Relation and Experience. The subject evaluates (on a 5-point scale):

1 - "Yes"; 5 - "No", to what extent each of them refers to the person and his/her life experience. The method is characterized by satisfactory psychometric properties. Its reliability measured by the  $\alpha$ -Cronbach coefficient for particular scales varies from 0.87 to 0.91 [26].

The measurement of explanatory variables - religiosity, life balance, and marital forgiveness - was made using respectively:

1. *Religious Meaning System Scale* (Skala Religijnego Systemu Znaczeń -SRSZ) by D. Krok. The tool includes 20 assertions which truthfulness (in reference to one's own) is assessed by the respondent on a seven-grades scale (from "Definitely not" to "Definitely yes"). They refer to two factors of the religious system meaning - *Religious Orientation* and *Religious Sense*. The tool is characterized by high internal compliance rates (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ), which for individual scales were: Religious orientation  $\alpha = 0.92$ ; Religious sense  $\alpha = 0.89$  [27].

2. *Life Review Questionnaire* (Kwestionariusz Bilansu Życiowego - KBŻ) prepared by P. Izdebski and A. Polak. The tool consists of 20 statements (including 16 diagnostic). The task of the examined person is to determine to what extent the given statement is true in relation to it. The assessment is made by choosing one of three answers: "No", "Hard to say", "Yes" [28]. This tool is characterized by high internal consistency. In the presented study  $\alpha$ -Cronbach for the entire scale was 0.79.

3. *The Marital Offenses-Specific Forgiveness Scale* (Skala Przebaczenia Małżeńskiego - MOFS) by G. G. Paleari, F. D. Finchman and C. Regalia [29] in the translation and adaptation of P. Brudek and S. Steuden. The MOFS consists of 10 statements that make up two dimensions of marital forgiveness: Resentment-Avoidance (6 items) and Kindness (4 items). The  $\alpha$ -Cronbach coefficients for individual dimensions were 0.87 (Resentment-Avoidance) and 0.72 (Kindness) [30].

### Statistical analyzes

The obtained data was subjected to statistical analysis using, first of all, Pearson's correlation, and then - to determine the predictors of self-esteem - multiple stepwise regression analysis [31].

### Results

In the first stage of statistical calculations the analysis of correlations of the analyzed variables was carried out. The results revealed the existence of statistically significant correlations between the general indicator of the sense of dignity and the religious system of meanings (both at the level of the global result and in two sub-dimensions) as well as two dimensions of forgiveness. Regarding religiosity, the obtained data suggests that the more the religious system of meanings becomes the prospect of assessing one's own life, the greater is the sense of one's own dignity. In turn in the case of forgiveness, readiness to forgive offense (*Friendliness*) raises, and the tendency to conceal injury (*Resentment-Avoidance*) reduces the sense of self-dignity. The balance of life was not statistically significantly correlated with a sense of holistic dignity. There were, however, significant negative correlations between the overall evaluation of life and such dimensions of sense of dignity as *Meaning* and *Loss*. The data obtained allow to assume that both life situations and circumstances (mental crisis, illness, poverty, life choices) in which the individual loses (may lose) the sense of his own dignity, as well as the increased reflexivity in the field of experiencing own dignity lower the overall assessment of the current life of the individual. More detailed data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Pearson's correlation results between the analyzed variables

Variable		Wymiary poczucia godności (KPWG-3)				
		Cognition	Relation	Meaning	Loss	Overall score
RSZ	Religious orientation	0.21**	0.13**	0.01 <sup>n.i.</sup>	— 0.31**	0.23**
	Religious sense	0.21**	0.13**	0.07 <sup>n.i.</sup>	— 0.32**	0.26**
	Overall result	0.23**	0.14**	0.03 <sup>n.i.</sup>	— 0.34**	0.26**
KBŻ	Overall result	0.11*	0.01 <sup>n.i.</sup>	— 0.21**	— 0.25**	0.06 <sup>n.i.</sup>
MOFS	Resentment-Avoidance	— 0.22**	— 0.13**	— 0.01 <sup>n.i.</sup>	0.34**	— 0.24**
	Kindness	0.32**	0.28**	0.02 <sup>n.i.</sup>	— 0.25**	0.30**

**Signatures:** \*\*  $p \leq 0,01$ ; \*  $p \leq 0,05$ ; <sup>n.i.</sup>  $p > 0,05$

The next stage of statistical analyzes was aimed at identifying key predictors of the sense of dignity of older people. For this purpose, a multiple regression analysis was carried out for the global result for the Questionnaire of Sense of Self-Dignity in relation to basic values in the Religious Meaning System Scale, Life Review Questionnaire and the Marital Offenses-Specific Forgiveness Scale. Analyzes were carried out in the whole group of respondents. Detailed data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple stepwise regression of KPWG-3 results with respect to basic values in SRSZ, KBŻ and MOFS (N = 315)

VARIABLEs	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Global indicator of self-esteem: $R = 0.34$ ; $R^2 = 0.12$ ; $F(2.313) = 20.51$ ; $p < 0.001$			
Friendliness (forgiveness)	0.24	4.13	0.001
Religious system of meanings	0.18	3.07	0.002

Two variables: kindness (readiness to forgive) and the religious system of meanings explain a total of 12% of the variability in the general sense of self-esteem. Considering the results obtained, it can be stated that the self-esteem of seniors is stronger, the greater kindness towards the spouse, resulting in a willingness to forgive the injustice, and the higher level of religiosity considered in terms of the system of meanings.

In order to check whether there is gender diversity in terms of the predictors of dignity, regression analyzes were performed separately for a group of women and a group of men. The obtained results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. Multiple stepwise regression of KPWG-3 results towards the results of basic values in SRSZ, KBŽ and MOFS separately for a group of women (N = 156) and for a group of men (N = 159)**

Variable	$\beta$	$t$	$p$
Women			
Global indicator of self-esteem: $R = 0.27$ ; $R^2 = 0.07$ ; $F(1.155) = 11.95$ ; $p < 0.001$			
Friendliness (forgiveness)	0.27	3.46	0.001
Men			
Global indicator of self-esteem: $R = 0.42$ ; $R^2 = 0.18$ ; $F(2.157) = 16.93$ ; $p < 0.001$			
Religious system of meanings	0.29	3.71	0.001
Friendliness (forgiveness)	0.22	2.85	0.005

In the case of women, only the willingness to forgive her husband turned out to be a statistically significant predictor. This variable explains 7% of variance in the area of the sense of dignity. This means that women with greater readiness for forgiveness simultaneously demonstrate a higher level of self-esteem. The situation is slightly different for the group of men. Here, the effects obtained by means of stepwise multiple regression showed that the most important connection with a sense of dignity (taken as a whole) has the religious system of meaning, followed by the tendency to forgive the harm caused by the wife. This model explains 18% of the variability of results in the area of a sense of dignity. The obtained result model suggests that in the case of men a higher level of religiousness and a desire to forgive the wife is accompanied by a higher level of self-esteem.

### Discussion of results

The completed research confirmed that among the psychological variables included in the project only the religious system of meanings and the positive dimension of forgiveness are predictors of the sense of dignity of the elderly. Additional analyzes taking into account the diversity of the sample by gender revealed that: (1) in the case of women, the status of the predictor was only retained by the tendency to forgive her husband for the harm done; (2) among men the role of the predictor has first of all religiosity, then the tendency to forgive the resentment. However, in regard to the balance of life as well as the negative component of forgiveness (Avoidance-Resentment), there are no empirical grounds for recognizing these variables as factors explaining the diversity of results within the sense of dignity of seniors. The obtained pattern of results remains consistent with the theoretical and empirical reports from psychological literature concerning the psychosocial functioning of older people [21, 32]. The natural area within which researchers explore self-esteem and religiousness of the elderly is the axiological sphere. The religious system of meanings in its content is the carrier of not only specific doctrinal truths or moral principles, but also a clearly and precisely defined system of values [27]. In turn, according to Z. Płużek and S. Steuden, the most important (first) structural component of the sense of self-esteem should be respect for oneself based on the possessed and recognized hierarchy of values and a consistent with it action [3].

Entering the stage of old age is associated with a change of current life priorities. This fact entails a number of transformations in the structure of values, which is manifested, inter alia, by greater reflexivity [33]. The axiological transformations taking place in the period of late adulthood thus remain in close relation to the sense of the dignity of seniors, which depends on the adopted system of values [6].

An interesting research project in the field of the discussed issues was carried out by K. Gajewska. The author has attempted to answer the question: do groups separated for their final values differ in terms of dimensions describing the experience of their own dignity? In order to obtain an answer to such a formulated research problem, 74 people (64 women and 10 men) - listeners of the Lublin University of the Third Age - were examined. Analysis of the results of the conducted research revealed, among others, that acceptance and implementation of the highest values entails an increase in the sense of self-esteem. In the context of the quoted research results, the predictive role of religiosity in the area of the sense of dignity of older people becomes understandable [34].

According to the model of human development proposed by E. Erikson, one of the key tasks of the period of late adulthood, which an individual is faced with, is to make a life balance [35]. According to P. Oleś, the balance of life "is a comprehensive summary of the extent to which life was successful and meaningful" [20, p. 273]. It includes everything that a person believes in contributing to her life success, as well as what she perceives as failure or suffering. A mature balancing of life makes the individual realize that the shape of her current life is to a large extent the result of her personal decisions - not always accurate - on the other hand encourages her/him to redefine what has passed - give new meaning to circumstances, events, situations that has passed [21]. It can be expected that the balance of life - its final result, positive or negative - will significantly affect the level of a person's dignity - self-respect, self-confidence and self-acceptance [3].

Meanwhile, the results of the research presented in this article do not allow us to confirm such a supposition. Seeking their psychological interpretation, it is worth referring to the base for the research project: L. Tornstam's theory. According to this concept, the process of gerotranscendancy includes the balance of life, but at the same time brings with it new developmental qualities (wisdom), enabling such (re)interpretation of significant facts from the past, which allows to keep the proper distance from them. As a result, the past life is not the only and basic source of self-esteem, but it also does not threaten the stability of that feeling [16].

For older married people, an important aspect of the assessment of one's own life will undoubtedly be the evaluation of the quality of the marital relationship - (often) several dozen years lived "in two" [19]. Forgiveness is considered an inevitable element of this evaluation. Research on forgiveness (also dyadic / marital) in late adulthood argues that: (1) older people are more likely to give injuries compared to younger people [36]; (2) the tendency to forgive, especially the low motivation for revenge and the acceptance of an attitude of kindness towards the perpetrator of an offending act, allows to avoid all kinds of conflicts and prevents their escalation, thus maintaining positive and valuable bonds for the individual [37].

Discussing the issue of self-esteem, Z. Płużek and S. Steuden pay attention to its interpersonal character. They assume that the sense of dignity is born and constituted in relations with other people. It depends on the awareness of human recognition, but at the same



time it strengthens itself by taking responsibility for the other person and his/her life [3]. The visibility of the relational aspect of self-esteem is based on the assumption that the issue of human dignity "obviously affects the process of personality maturation and the construction of one's own life in the context of other people - family, social or national community" [5, p. 19]. Acquiring and confirming the subjective conviction that one deserves respect and is recognized in the eyes of others is carried out in the course of social relations. In this context, the observation of A. Kępiński seems to be accurate, which states: "Looking at someone, we see ourselves, our social reflection, i.e. we see how a person receives us, with disrespect, fear, admiration, contempt" [38, p. 101].

Referring the above considerations to the reality of a marital relationship that has stood the test of time, it is impossible to overestimate the role of forgiveness (conjugal) in nurturing and raising the self-esteem of people (spouses) in the period of late adulthood. It is difficult to deny the rightness of G. Allport, who claims that "even the best-integrated personality does not always work in complete harmony with its system of values" [39, p. 64]. A man can be wrong and is often wrong. He can hurt another and often does. In doing so, it acts against the recognized values, and thus exposes itself to the loss of self-esteem. For it is impossible to expect self-respect when more or less consciously choosing evil instead of good [3, 5]. In this context, forgiveness within the matrimonial dyad restores the spouses's self-dignity who was shaken by the caused and / or inflicted (to the other) harm and protects them against decompensation [40].

### **Implications of own research results for psychotherapy**

The results of the completed project allow to draw the following conclusions for aid interventions in the field of psychotherapy:

1. When providing psychotherapeutic assistance to the elderly, particular attention should be paid to the way of perceiving and experiencing their own dignity. It is worth to identify key personality factors (religiosity, value system, forgiveness) and socio-economic ones that serve to sustain and / or increase the sense of self-esteem, as well as those that threaten its stability.
2. During the therapeutic process, it is worth appreciating the role of religiosity or, more broadly, the spiritual dimension of the person, if this aspect appears at the session of the patient / client initiative. Religiosity (mature) captured in the categories of the system of meanings makes it possible to adopt such a perspective in the assessment of one's own person and life, which protects the sense of dignity of a person.
3. When working with elderly spouses, action should be taken to support the process of forgiveness. This can be achieved by inspiring seniors to redefine past experiences, their own self and relationships with others - including marital relationships. The adoption of such a direction of psychological interactions can help them (re)build an intimate bond.
4. In psychotherapy of the elderly, it seems more important to support the development of religiosity (the spiritual sphere) and the tendency to forgive (more broadly the process of gerotranscendence) than focusing mainly on balancing life.

### **Limitations of the research**

The presented research project, along with valuable cognitively results, also has some limitations. Their perception and critical analysis lead to caution in the generalization of the obtained results.

1. The research was carried out in a correlation plan, which results in limited possibilities of inference about the causal nature of the identified relations. This fact encourages to undertake further research on the conditions of the sense of dignity of people in late adulthood, based on longitudinal studies.
2. The studied group cannot be considered as representative of Polish society (Polish seniors' population). Despite the fact that at the stage of preparing the research project, the respondents were differentiated in terms of sociodemographic variables, the sample characteristics do not reflect the full distribution of these features in the Polish population of older people (60-75 years). Therefore, the idea of carrying out a similar project on a representative sample of Polish seniors seems worth considering. The global demographic trends are also indicating such need
3. Caution should be exercised in comparing the obtained results of research with the reports of foreign authors. It should be remembered that searching for an analogy between Polish seniors and elderly people representing other nationalities may give rise to certain difficulties resulting from different cultural experiences and specific historical and economic conditions of Poland. These circumstances can to a large extent determine the level (specificity) of the sense of dignity of respondents who agreed to participate in the presented project.

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