

THE ASSOCIATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WITH SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF THE SENIORS AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDIES AT THIRD AGE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

This article focuses on social exclusion of the seniors due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on studies at third age universities. First part is dedicated to old age and the process of aging with the senior needs and their quality of life being described. The problem of social exclusion due to the Covid-19 pandemic is given attention afterwards, as well as free time activities of the seniors and the potential for further studies. All of that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Seniors, social exclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic, education, third age university

INTRODUCTION

In old age people begin to feel lonely, which may lead to social isolation or even social exclusion. Therefore, it is necessary to offer them various activities to make them feel fulfilled. Even in the senior age people need to feel useful and beneficial to the society and dedicate their free time to activities which fulfill them. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced each of us, but seniors the most. They could not meet their relatives and people of their age, and the feeling of loneliness became more intense (see Banu and Özgür, 2022). Some seniors lost motivation to continue with their activities, including their studies, or they lacked technical medium necessary for online education. Empiric survey in the form of non-standardized anonymous questionnaire in electronic and printed version among the seniors was used. The survey took place in the period of September – November 2021. The questionnaire focused on reasons of seniors to study, and the forms of studies during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of this survey are presented in this article.

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Old age and aging

The old age or senium is the final period in life span; aging (senescence) is a physiological process affecting each individual. 'Aging is a complex, irreversible and dynamic process which affects all living organisms continuously from their conception by involuntal changes.' It is a set of interconnected processes of biological, psychological, and social aging. Each individual registers these processes to a different extent. It is influenced by genetic endowment of an individual, but also by disorders and phenomena occurring in the surrounding environment of an individual. Přibyl mentions physiological and pathological aging. Physiological aging (i.e., healthy aging) is referred to as primary type of aging. It includes natural and common age-related signs creating a typical picture – the senile phenotype, which is a continuous process with acceleration after the age of 65. The secondary type of aging is pathological. This type of aging is associated with diseases, whereby the aging process is accelerated. Also, the disparity between calendar and functional aging as the calendar age is lower than the functional age, is considered pathological aging in some cases (Přibyl, 2015, p. 9–10).

The process of aging is affected by numerous factors, which can be described as inner and outer factors. Inner factors include genetic makeup, physical illness and psychological disorders, the individual's psychological makeup (e.g., character orientation, coping with stressful situations, life goals). Outer factors influencing aging include physical phenomena (e.g., work environment, living environment), chemical phenomena (e.g., skin complications) and social phenomena (e.g., quality of housing, financial security, education) (2015).

As it has been already mentioned, old age is the final period in life span which terminates with death. It is a consequence of involuntal changes which are determined both genetically and by other factors – diseases, lifestyle, living conditions. As far as the periodization of old age is concerned, the periodization of human age after 15 as formulated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) is generally accepted: the initial period of age from 60 to 74 is called early old age, senescence, followed by the period from 75 to 89 named as one's own old age, middle age, and the period covering the age of 90 and over is called longevity, patriarchy (Přibyl, 2015).

Venglářová (2007) also remarks that with older age numerous changes occur, both in the physical sphere (changes in appearance, thermoregulation, loss of muscle mass, activity of the senses, degeneration of joints, changes in the digestive or excretory system, etc.), psychological (memory impairment, difficulty in learning new things, incredulity, emotional instability, impaired judgement, lower self-confidence, changes in perception) and social (retirement, change in lifestyle, loss of loved ones and loneliness, financial difficulties).

Petřková and Čornaničová (2004) point out that the senior generation is more vulnerable than the younger generation. The reasons for vulnerability are poverty, ageism or segregation, prejudices, intergenerational conflicts, rapid changes in society, morbidity, loss of self sufficiency, senior abuse, or loneliness (due to loss of loved ones)

and others. The social image of older people becomes an important topic nowadays (see e.g. Klimczuk and Tomczyk, 2020).

Due to the constant development of the society, which (among other things) allows the life expectation to extend thanks to medical advances and healthy lifestyle, the senior age is becoming an important developmental stage in human life. Application of the lifelong wisdom as well as experience of the seniors, their know-how and high level of expertise leads to the possibility of increasing the economic potential in the society. The society may become competitive, and it may have higher chances to succeed in the globalized world. So that this potential of increasing number of older people is fully used, it is necessary to concentrate on two areas. One area being the health and the other one lifelong learning. Out of these two areas active participation in development of civil society, support of intergenerational dialogue and participation in the labour market develops. It is more than desirable to provide the seniors with an appropriate quality environment for their active participation in the society. The seniors belong to one of the vulnerable groups in their access to participation in the society, due to several negative barriers. These barriers are formed by deteriorating health condition, lower income, lower level of education, insufficient transport accessibility, complicated access to services, age discrimination and social stereotypes in old age (Čeledová et al., 2016).

Human needs and quality of life in old age

Adequate formulation of the needs of the seniors and the degree of their subsequent satisfaction has a significant impact on the experience of old age. A need may be described as a manifestation of some deficiency, a lack of something which is required to be eliminated (Příbyl, 2015). The American Psychological Association According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2022, online), a need is a state of tension in the body that results from a lack of something necessary for survival, well-being, or personal fulfilment. Příbyl (2015) also remarks that satisfaction or non-satisfaction of the needs influences psychological activity of the individual (thinking, attention, volitional processes), and contributes to the formation of an individual's behavioural pattern. The fulfilment of needs has a social character. Activities leading to fulfilment of needs are embedded in the individual's social networks. The needs are not only the basic motive for maintaining balance within the body, but also the basic motive for maintaining balance between the person and the surrounding environment. The human needs may be divided into several areas. The first area is represented by biological needs including everything that our body needs (e.g., food and liquids, movement, sleep). The second area is formed by psychological needs, i.e., the need of security and certainty. The social needs belong to the third area as a person (social being) desires personal contact and communication with other people. The fourth area is dedicated to spiritual needs, especially the need for meaningful life and the need for forgiveness. The border between the mentioned needs is not definite. Some needs may overlap or complement each other – mainly psychological, spiritual, and social needs.

The senior needs are most often examined in the context of quality of life. The World Health Organisation defines the quality of life as 'an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns' (WHO, 2022, online).

Petřková and Čornaničová (2004) remark that the quality of life may be understood as a specific concept of what brings an individual a sense of well-being and also satisfaction with life. The quality of life of the seniors includes social, biological, psychological, and spiritual aspects of life.

Přibyl (2015) emphasises that there are also other factors influencing the quality of life of the seniors. These are for example quality of social contacts (relationships with grown-up children, neighbours, friends), accessibility to health care, high quality and affordable housing, safety, awareness of what is happening around them, provided services etc. Petřková and Čornaničová (2004) add that one of the indicators of the quality of life is the availability of educational activities for the seniors. Educational activities are one of the most important factors to maintain the quality of life, as they activate intellectual and cognitive functions, strengthen mental and physical health and self-confidence (concerning connection between educational activities and quality of life see e.g. Mackowicz and Wnek-Godzek, 2018). One of the needs in old age is to be active and to feel useful, which significantly changes and often weakens with retiring. Educational activities are also an important indicator of social position. Personality development of an individual through lifelong education is a basic human right that needs, among other things, the support of the state and the entire society; on the other hand, personal assumptions, desire for self-realization and person's cognitive needs are also important. This is confirmed also by Bednaříková (2010) who states that one form of support to maintain the quality of life is education as it helps to develop and cultivate one's personality and adaptation to constantly changing conditions.

Social exclusion in old age

Exclusion means to exclude a person from the society. This exclusion may happen due to lack of finances, low level of education, absence of work; exclusion may also reflect the lack of interest of an individual or a certain group to participate in social events.

Giddens (2013) points out that social exclusion describes the reasons for some people being excluded from common functioning of human society. There are numerous factors which prevent individuals or groups from accessing the opportunities available to mainstream society.

In case of senior group of inhabitants, it is a priority to focus on current problems, which have a negative impact on their possible exclusion from society. At the community level, these problems can be summarized in several areas, which are specified, for example, by Čeledová et al.: It is necessary to enable the seniors to participate in formal and informal social life, to secure their safety, protection of health, appropriate living conditions, social and health services, as well as transport services. So that older people

can be integrated into society, it is a priority to minimize the persistent negative attitudes of society towards aging. Aging of the Population is usually put in the context of rising health and social care costs and increasing demands on the pension system. However, the contribution of the seniors to society is not sufficiently perceived or even discussed. Active participation of the seniors in social life is beneficial not only for this age group, but also for the whole society. Society may use their knowledge and experience, and on the contrary, participation in social events is important for the seniors, enabling them to establish new relationships, build respect and esteem and a sense of usefulness through their own self-realisation (Čeledová et al., 2016).

Zavázalová et al. (2001) describe social isolation as a loss of contact with the surroundings of the individual. The seniors depend on the society and social contacts, and the loss of them is very stressful. The situation when the senior lives alone and is not in touch with their family and acquaintances may result in social isolation. The author further remarks that, according to estimates, about 20 % of the seniors live in social isolation.

For social exclusion in general, prevention, i.e., prevention of this undesirable phenomenon, is essential, namely primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention focuses on preventing phenomena within the entire population, secondary prevention focuses on individuals at risk of negative phenomena, and tertiary prevention focuses on individuals who have already experienced this undesirable phenomenon (Hartl, Hartlová, 2009). The prevention of social exclusion is especially important for the seniors, so that they do not experience loneliness and social isolation. It is necessary to offer them a wide range of activities they may become interested in, will participate in, and which enables them to improve social interactions and make new social connections. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs created the document 'Social Inclusion Strategy 2021–2030' which focuses on socially excluded people and people at risk of social exclusion. This document points out, among other things, that especially among elderly women living alone, the risk of social exclusion is up to 28.3 %. The aim of this Strategy is to enable the seniors to have a comparable quality of life to the rest of the population. Due to this reason, it is necessary to prepare such programmes to reduce the risk of social exclusion of the seniors (MPSV, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic and its association with social exclusion in old age

In 2019, an outbreak of infection caused by a new type of coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China. This contagion began to spread rapidly to other regions of China and then to the world. The new type of coronavirus was later on officially recognised as SARS-CoV-2 by the World Health Organisation and the infectious disease was called Covid-19 (the European Council, the Council of the European Union, 2022, online). Although most people infected with this type of virus have mild to moderate respiratory distress and recover without the need for special treatment, in some cases serious illness occurs which cannot be treated without medical attention. The risk groups include the seniors and people with underlying conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer,

etc. However, anyone can get sick with COVID-19 and become seriously ill or die at any age (WHO, 2022b, online).

As a result of this pandemic, individual countries had to take action to prevent, or at least slow down, the spread of the coronavirus. In the Czech Republic people were prohibited from travelling abroad, they had to wear respirators or another form of respiratory protection, testing became mandatory, people being infected were quarantined, the number of people attending mass events was limited, or these events were cancelled etc. One of the restrictions in 2020 was the closure of all schools for several months. This restriction had an impact on all teaching at universities, including the implementation of the educational offer of third age universities. Some third age universities used the possibility of distance education in the form of online teaching.

Free time in old age

In old age people experience a brand-new situation, as they have a lot of free time, which is understood as a specific time, which is not dedicated to work or duties. They can choose freely any activities they want to dedicate their free time. These activities then give a person feeling of satisfaction and relaxation. These activities may include relaxation as well as leisure activities and leisure education (Pávková, 2002). Economic and health changes may affect the leisure time of the seniors. Retirement is of course considered the main milestone. In this period, the senior should be able to continue doing their favourite activities and also start with the new ones (Janiš, Skopalová, 2016). These activities include cultural, sports, travel and educational activities. As part of cultural activities, the seniors like to attend film or theatre performances, some also create their own works of art or devote their time to music. Sports activities vary a lot, and these are not only ball games or swimming, but also walks and hiking tours. According to Duffková et al. (2008), educational activities, also an important part of the seniors' free time, are also important for them from a social point of view, because they enable them to develop new social relationships (at third age universities, or at another place of organized education). Self-education also has its place in their free time, as it allows them to acquire new knowledge by reading books or information sources on the internet (Duffková et al., 2008).

Petřková and Čornaničová emphasize that in old age people have more time for leisure activities; the seniors face a new life experience, which may be challenging for further personal development. They warn of the retirement syndrome which may occur as a result of change in free time structure, or loss of job role and prestige, excess of free time, and lower standard of living. The solution is, among other things, offer of suitable activities (Petřková, Čornaničová, 2004).

Education in old age (focusing on U3V)

Education is available for individuals at each age which means that it not only for children and young people, but also for the seniors. It is known that there is a slight deterioration

of memory in the elderly period, when the seniors need more time to memorize new information, but this deficiency is compensated by a greater patience and responsibility they put into their studies (Suchá, Holmerová, 2019).

Already Livečka (1979) classifies four functions of the education in old age - preventive, anticipative, strengthening and rehabilitation. Mühlpachr (2002) characterizes these functions as follows – he understands the preventive function as the implementation of precautions that are important to be taken already during adulthood in order to positively influence the process of aging and old age; anticipative function is associated with the need to be positively prepared for the lifestyle changes in the retirement. According to the author, the rehabilitation function represents the restoration and maintenance of physical and mental strength, and the most important is the strengthening function, which contributes to the development of the interests, needs and abilities of people in the post-productive age, to the support of their activity, to the cultivation of their interests and needs.

Regarding education of the seniors in our country, it started to develop in forms in lectures in seniors' clubs and cultural facilities. Later, integrated lecture blocks were organized, which were called academies of the third age. In 1986, the first monothematic course of the University of the Third Age (U3V) was opened in Prague. At present almost all public universities offer U3V programmes. Mühlpachr (2002) considers universities of the third age to be a specific part of lifelong learning, with U3V providing the highest form of education at university level which is different from other forms of educational activities oriented to the seniors. The attendees of U3V use a status of exceptional students at the particular university. The character of this education is of personal development, it is not professional training, and therefore does not give the right to professional employment (2002).

Third age universities fulfill important goals, which include introducing the seniors to scientific knowledge, increasing their self-awareness, and gaining insight into a rapidly changing world, so helping them to navigate modern affairs (Mühlpachr, 2009). According to Benešová (2014), developing new social relationships and useful spending of free time is also very important apart from new knowledge and skills. Čeledová et al. (2016) emphasise the need to inform the seniors about the possibilities of self-defence against abuse and fraud aimed at them. They also point out the importance of informing the seniors about the organization of social life, about intergenerational relationships in the family, etc. (Čeledová et al., 2016).

Motivation is a key factor for learning in senium, as it makes the senior desirable to acquire new skills and information. There are four areas of motivation regarding education, including cognitive, emotional, performance and social needs. Cognitive needs are related to acquiring of new knowledge and skills, emotional needs are related to emotional states during the learning process, performance needs are related to the difficulty of the tasks to be solved, and social needs are related to the relationships among the participants in educational situations. Therefore, it is important for the lecturer to recognize which needs are the key ones for individual participants and choose

the right motivation accordingly (Veteška et al., 2011). We may also discuss cognitive needs (acquiring knowledge, orientation in social events, etc.), the need for activity, productivity, usefulness, meaningful activity, and above all pursuit of self-realization, affirmation of identity and gaining control over one's life (Petřková, Čornaničová, 2004). Veteška et al. (2011) emphasize that the senior may be motivated in two ways. The first one is based on the prevailing needs of individual participants. The lecturer should choose topics that focus on social needs of the seniors, while adapting the difficulty of each task to their performance needs. The other one focuses on outer conditions accompanied by incentives increasing motivation. This should activate the needs of the participants and motivate them to learn or solve the particular task.

The survey conducted at the University of Hradec Králové showed that the respondents considered new knowledge and information to be the greatest advantage and motivation for education at the University of the Third Age in Hradec Králové, the second most frequent answer was social contact with people of the same age, improving memory, their own activity, or also valuable ways of spending free time.

The senior may be highly motivated but there may various barriers limiting their studies. These barriers may be divided into inner and outer barriers. Inner barriers include, for example, a bad experience with studies, so they are afraid of repeated failure, or the belief that they already have enough knowledge and so do not need any further education; outer barriers include lack of external incentives to study. Specifically, seniors generally do not need education to improve their position or maintain their current job (Rabušicová et al., 2008).

During the Covid 19-pandemic only the distance form of education was available. Distance education has its advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include, for example, easier access to studies despite various health problems (mobility problems, impaired motor skills) or a long distance to the place of study. Due to these reasons distance education via computer may be better option for some seniors (Bednaříková, 2011). Disadvantages include loss of social contacts, the need for a strong will to study, the feeling of loneliness while studying (Zormanová, 2017). Due to social distance the participants may feel alone, they may lose will to study and so they quit it. Distance education combined with the use of technology offers the means which help students to better orient themselves in the study materials. This form of education expects the participants to be independent, to go through the materials and learn according to their own abilities (Zormanová, 2017).

Results of the survey

The survey conducted at the University of Hradec Králové revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible to study or to participate in the studies at U3V UHK for most respondents (87.5 %). More than half respondents (52.9%) definitely agreed. Only 9.6% respondents rather thought that the pandemic made it difficult for them to study, and for 2.9% respondents the pandemic was not a barrier.

Only 28.7% respondents used the option of online learning at the University of Hradec Králové. In case respondents also used other forms of education (other than online education at U3V UHK), it was most often reading of articles (49.3 %), or watching videos (22.1 %), 12.5% respondents read articles on the websites of educational institutions. 9.6% respondents learned via online courses or used the offer of virtual university of the third age. More than one third of respondents (36%) did not use any other option of online education than education at the University of Hradec Králové during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A great part of respondents did not use any other form of education than online education. It is specifically 77.2% respondents. 22.8% respondents used other form of education – most respondents read books (either their own books, or books borrowed from the library), internet sources represented another form of education as respondents watched videos on YouTube channel, programmes on public TV channels (mainly ČT2, ČT3 channels) and documentaries. The answers of respondents also included the daily press and magazines.

Overall, 56.6% respondents evaluate the educational offer during the Covid-19 pandemic rather or completely negatively (43.4% rather negatively, 13.2% respondents negatively). On the contrary, 36.8% respondents evaluate this situation rather positively, and 6.6 % respondents positively.

In the context of conducted survey respondents answered a question focused on barriers to further education. Most often (85.3%) they stated that they do not see any barriers; in case some respondents noticed the barriers, for 6.6 % it was lack of free time, for 4.4 % it was inadequate educational offer or poor accessibility from the place of residence, for 3.7 % it was poor health.

Respondents were asked if they missed something in the educational offer during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most respondents (73.5%) lacked social contact which was understandable as they were not able to meet at the lectures. 30.1% respondents stated that the educational offer was not varied enough, 17.6% respondents mentioned lack of information about the educational offer. 12.5% respondents did not miss anything. Only a few respondents (2.2%) think that information regarding the educational offer (e.g., course registration guide) was not clear.

CONCLUSION

This article focused on social exclusion of the seniors due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its negative impact on studies at third age universities. During the pandemic time, the seniors are the most threatened group. The aim was to show that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected life of the seniors due to social exclusion. The pandemic had a negative impact on many areas of life, not excluding the possibility of the seniors to study at third age universities.

The research conducted at the University of the Third Age in Hradec Králové revealed

that most respondents (87.5%) were not able (or had difficulties) to participate in U3V studies. The research also included a question focused on the use of online education. According to the answers, only 28.7% respondents used this option. The remaining part chose different form of education, e.g., reading books, watching videos or TV programmes. The pandemic affected the offer of educational courses, which was evaluated rather positively by 36.8% respondents and evaluated negatively by 13.2% respondents. The questionnaire also included a question asking what the seniors missed in lectures and courses during the Covid-19 pandemic. 73.5% respondents stated that they lacked social contact the most, they also considered the offer to be insufficiently varied (30.1 %), and 17.6% respondents did not have enough information about the education offer. The results of our research show that the Covid-19 pandemic had a demonstrably negative impact on senior education, organizing educational events and their participation in them.

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