Title page

Proud to be a woman: womanhood, old age and emotions

Author:

Dr Monika Wilińska

Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology

School of Applied Social Science, University of Stirling

FK9 4LA Stirling, Scotland, UK

E-mail: Monika.wilinska@stir.ac.uk

Tel.: 0044 1786 467709

Accepted for publication in *Journal of Women & Aging* published by Taylor and Francis.
The final published version is available at:
https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2015.1017431

Abstract

This paper takes its starting point in the discussions regarding intersecting discourses of gender and age and the lived experience of older women. The main objective is to discuss the experience of womanhood among older women and to demonstrate their active role in creating spaces for themselves and their friends, and affecting each other. The study is based on narrative interviews with female members of the University of the Third Age (U3A). The main findings describe older women who actively engage with discourses of gender to embark on positive constructions of womanhood. They create their own spaces for women's activism that are filled with positive emotions mobilized to support each other. This paper discusses such findings and their relevance to the study of old age and gender. As a result, it serves as an invitation to think and feel differently about older women and their experience of womanhood.

Keywords: older women, emotions, affective reading,

> *"There is no point in growing old unless you can be a witch, and accumulate spiritual power in place of the political and economic power that has been denied to you as a woman. Witches are descended from the sibyls and female saints; their lineage is noble and no woman need be ashamed to call herself a witch."* (Greer, G. 1992:9)

Introduction

Whether in gerontology, sociology or feminist studies, older women emerged as the key category exemplifying the experience of living within two interweaving systems of oppression: ageism and sexism (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Calasanti, 2007; Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Calasanti et al., 2006; Estes, 2006; Garner, 1999; Hatch, 2005; Krekula, 2007; Levy, 1988; Ray, 1999; Russell, 2007), or as Woodward (1999) put it, living through the phenomenon of a "multiple ageing" being suddenly thrown onto women. In particular, older women's bodies have been researched as sites of ageist and sexist discourses (Calasanti, 2007; Holstein, 2006; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Hurd Clarke, 2011; Ward and Holland, 2011; Woodward, 1999: Twigg, 2004; 2013). Yet, the aim of those studies was to present women as more than mere victims. Subsequently, while identifying oppressive conditions, this stream of research began demonstrating that older women were not void of the sense of agency that could be mobilised to mount active resistance.

The experience of older women is diverse, complex and multiple- this is what older women have known for ages (Bernard et al., 1993). To produce a similar view in knowledge, there is therefore a need to "give a voice to mid-life and older women; and focus more on women abilities, on creating positive images and on having meaning and relevance at an individual level" (Phillips & Bernard, 2001:168). This paper is an attempt to do so. It brings forward the notion of agency, space and emotion to the lived experience of older women. My aim is to engage with the experience of womanhood among older women to demonstrate their active role in creating

spaces for themselves, and affecting each other. In particular, I focus on different emotions characterizing these experiences and their role in the lives of older women. Applying a social approach to emotions that conceives of them as relational and dependent on the context (Williams, 2001), I will navigate the ways in which older women become affected to support one another, to embrace their womanhood and to stand up in the environment that refuses them access to public spaces by relegating them to the domain of household and a private space.

The context for this discussion is Poland and the University of the Third Age (U3A). The history of Polish U3A dates back to the mid-1970s, when the first U3A was established to promote the cultural and educational activity among older people. To date, there are nearly 200 such organisations with thousands of older people joining to participate in lectures, seminars, exhibitions, sport activities and other events that aim to mobilise and educate older people. Similarly to other voluntary organisation, there is a high degree of feminisation at U3A (Williamson, 2000), which is also the case in Poland. Older women play therefore an essential role in the preservation and development of the U3A idea. The material used here comes from a larger study examining the work and organization of the U3A and its position within discourses of ageing and old age (see Author, 2012). The paper is organized as follows: it begins with an introduction to the societal conditions of being a woman in post-communist Poland. Thereafter, the concept of affective reading is introduced to explain the analytical point employed in this paper. The result section is separated into three parts: belonging and passion, women's spaces and spaces of life. The final section provides concluding remarks reflecting upon the current findings and proposing further areas of empirical inquiry.

Women in Poland

In the setting of post-socialist changes, discourses on gender have played one of the key roles in the formation of new states and new realities (Gal & Kligman, 2000). Discourse on the natural differences between women and men has been taken for granted, and, moreover, it was used as a starting point for many political discussions and debates that have shaped Polish politics since early 1990s. For example, new family and gender policies have been based on the ideal of a patriarchal family with a clearly defined role for women. The implicit familialism (Szkira, 2010) or public maternalism (Glass & Fodor, 2007) of the Polish welfare state, assigns women the role of primary family caretakers, offering very little support for labour activity. Women are mothers foremost, and then workers, as is also reflected in the organisation of parental leave schemes (Plomien, 2009). Hence, the scarcity of child care and the conservative image of the family are distinctive features of the Polish system (Fodor, 2006; Glass & Fodor, 2007; Lange & Frątczak, 2010; Steinhilber, 2006; Szkira, 2010). The vulnerability of women is increasing (Fodor, 2006) as the social system consistently pushes them towards the domestic space (LaFont, 2001; Fodor, 2006) accentuating the importance of the public/private divide (Rukszto, 1997). For these reasons, the whole system is often referred to as a "democracy with a male face" (LaFont, 2001: 213), and the newly emerged discourse of citizenship-entrepreneurship embraces the ideas of patriarchy, Catholicism and capitalism (Rukszto, 1997).

Patriarchy seems to thrive in the new reality, and it appears to be well-accommodated in the politics, particularly in the right wing discourse (Graff, 2008a, 2010; Środa, 2010). The discourse of nationhood provides many examples of how patriarchal norms are intertwined with the ideas of gender and nationalism to the forefront the figure of the Virgin Mary (Graff, 2008b). The Virgin Mary became an integral part of discourse on the Polish nation in the XVII century when she was pronounced as the Crowned Queen of Poland (Porter, 2005). In recent years, the figure

of the Virgin Mary was particularly visible during discussions surrounding Polish accession to the EU that provoked many nationalistic revelations. Analysing the rhetoric of right-wing parties, Graff (2008b) describes how feminine Poland and its vulnerability were constructed to reinforce the notion of brotherhood and encourage the sons of the nation to stand up in defence of their dear mother. Often, such statements were made in places known for their religious symbolism. The language of the conservative fraction of the Catholic Church is often used by the right-wing parties in public discourse, regardless of public opinion (Graff, 2008a). This politicised form of Catholicism that merges with a discourse of patriotism is prevalent in public life (Graff, 2010).

Gender equality has always been among the most neglected issues in Polish public policies (Fodor, 2006; LaFont, 2001; Steinhilber, 2006). This condition is so persistent that some talk about the ghettoisation of women's issues in politics (Hardy et al., 2008). As is typical of a socialist policy, gender segregation in the labour market and gender gaps in wages remains intact; the only difference is a significant decrease in female employment that began in 1990 (Steinhilber, 2006). New policies restricting eligibility for family and maternity benefits have begun to encroach on the reconciliation of work and family (Balcerzak-Paradowska et al., 2003; Fodor et al., 2002; Plomien, 2009). Although women continue to be better educated in comparison with men, their entry into the labour market remains more difficult (Fuszara, 2000), causing increasing levels of employment (Balcerzak-Paradowska et al., 2003) and contributing to the process of feminisation of poverty in Poland (Tarkowska, 2002).In contrast, new spaces of activism that were opened by the neo-liberal market offer hope to women, particularly at the community level (Hardy et al., 2008). Grassroots initiatives, both in the workplace and outside of it, may provide an important starting point from which the situation of women in Poland may change (ibid.).

Gender remains an important perspective from which to view events since 1989 and allows us to understand the changing identities of men and women (Marody & Giza-Poleszczuk, 2000).

Gender may also provide a very different perspective on the history of and participants in the social change process. Penn's (2005) rereading of the Solidarity movement in Poland is exemplary in this respect. Through a study of the lives of women who were key figures of the movement, she not only shows how sex discrimination was intertwined with the movement's ideology, but, more importantly, she sheds light on the forgotten heroines of the transformation. Women were active in the process of change; on many occasions, it was as a result of their efforts that the movement was able to continue. However, in the official discourse of the change, only the names of male heroes appear. The dominant gender discourse presenting women as family beings successfully silenced their voices and opened a space for the creation of a male version of history.

The image of women as family-oriented, apolitical, non-public beings is often contrasted against the view of men as the proper inhabitants of public spaces, such as politics and the labour market. To be woman in Poland is to learn that there is only one destiny for you: to be a housewife. Women are discriminated against by a discourse stressing their special and unique role, including compliments on their "natural" qualities as mothers (Graff, 2010). One of the strongest stereotypes of women in Poland is that of *Matka Polka* (Mother-Pole). *Matka Polka* represents the ideal of women who will stand by her husband and children to nourish them and safeguard traditional cultural values. This ideal woman is devoted to family reproduction but does not really have sexuality and simply sacrifices herself for the sake of her family (Penn, 2005). Motherhood is a duty that she needs to fulfil (Środa, 2010). As Graff (2010) acknowledges, the title of her first book on the situation of women in Poland, '*Świat bez kobiet'* (The world without women), published in 2001, was "meant to be ironic. Today, I think, it has become realistic." (p.12). It appears that the democratisation process entailed the de-emancipation of women, who were refused the right to take part in creating the new reality (Środa, 2010).

Affective reading

The main focus of this paper is on description rather than critique of societal conditions emergent in the lives of older women. Description as a mode of knowing in science, has recently received more attention. Love (2010) places it at the axes of two processes: the emergence of new interpretation theories that delineate limitations of the critical theory and the growing emphasis on personal engagement in science and knowledge. She refers to Erving Goffman and his style of turning to 'the ordinary' to name him as the precursor of the descriptive turn in social sciences. In particular, she accentuates how his two methods of exemplarity and abstraction coexist to open the door to new ways of understanding various phenomena. Koivunen (2010) pays tribute to another scholar who changes the way of thinking about research: Sedgwick. Koivunen locates her discussion within the concept of affect and presents Sedgwick's plea for reparative reading as an affect-based methodology in action that brings about positive, hopeful and promising perspectives. In this way, social science research does not need to be about revealing the 'bad guys'; as Koivunen (2010) notes, it becomes more similar to an act of wondering and being surprised about the world.

What is the problem with too much critique? Sedgwick (2003) advances a five-point discussion in which she presents key assumptions of critical research. Her main arguments can be summarised as follows: critical researchers know that things are bad; they do everything to show how bad things are; and, on top of that, they claim that the knowledge they produce is the only one that may change the world. She calls this approach paranoia. When researching the intersecting discourses of age and gender, I also became paranoid at times. I was easily seduced by the power of critique and the value of revelation and denunciation. I could identify a number of structural forces that encroached on the situation of older women in Poland. Being a Polish woman, I could easily relate to the type of discourses one has to deal with on daily basis and the difficulty

of resisting and/or rejecting widely spread knowledge about traditional roles and positions of women in the society. I believed in critique as a way of changing attitudes and raising awareness. I started seeing "bad guys"(!) everywhere and weeping about the poor fate of their victims. I would complain about all of the misuses and abuses of power and then sit down and lament that there is no escape and that we are doomed. It takes time to see paranoia, and it takes even more time to try to change it. Sedgwick's (2003) call for reparative reading is a call for the presence of the positive in research.

Inspired by the above call, I engage in -what I refer to- affective reading. Affective reading that I advance in this paper is a form of analysis that brings forward emotions and feelings both as objects of analysis but also a mode of reading them. The concept of emotions as a source of knowledge has been a unique characteristic of feminist approaches to methodologies that develop notions of knowledge as contextual, situated, embedded and personal. Woodward (1991) was one of the first to discuss the cultural politics of emotions in relation to age. She refers, in particular, to the presence of anxiety (1991) and anger (2003, 2009) as emotions that are culturally evoked and that may be provoked towards old age. She draws attention to emotions and their role in creating living spaces for people and to embark on a discourse of age and emotions that recognises the value of emotional experience and emotional standards (Woodward, 2009). To this end, the value of negative emotions, such as, anger and bitterness is acknowledged as important tools particularly when negotiating and recreating the experience of older women (Holstein, 2006). In this article, I focus on positive emotions to demonstrate that they can also be transformative and that they are also needed to bring a change into the images and living situations of older women. This approach is in line with newly emerged ways of thinking about old age. For example, Liang and Luo (2012) write about holistic approaches to ageing that bring forward fresh perspectives for understanding ageing and changing lives in old age. Sandberg's (2013) concept of affirmative old age, built around the concept of diversity, provides another venue for reconsidering and combating negative and one-sided accounts of ageing. Affective

reading practiced in this paper can become the means of reaching these new ways of viewing aging and old age. It may also provide a one way of responding to Grennier's (2012) call for research embracing subjective and emotional responses to the socially imagined ways of being old.

Affective reading concerns emotions in both epistemological and methodological terms; it allows the researcher to read emotions displayed by the researched persons, but it also encourages her to be carried away by various emotions that emerge during a research process. It builds on the idea that emotions are both individual and shared (Woodward, 2009), and that to know means to feel as well. With affective reading, not only may we participate in the shared emotions found at the research site but narrate them back in a way that moves and transposes some of those emotions in the written text and onto those who read it. In research on older women, this approach may enrich the understanding of older women and their way of making sense of and feeling their age and gender.

Stories that I am going to read in this way were created during my visits to the University of the Third Age. The aim of my research was to investigate images of old age and ageing at the U3A, and to place them within the context of ageist discourses permeating societal spaces. In the course of fieldwork, I collected both written and oral narratives, complemented with documents and images depicting the U3A, its members and main activities. I did not intend to focus particularly on women, but there were women themselves who gradually refocused my attention. In the course of revisiting the empirical material and attending to my field notes, I began hearing stories of older women who were proud of being women, who wanted to speak out and to give evidence to their lives as older women. I decided to approach those stories with an affective mind. While doing that, I began feeling their content. The following sections: belonging and passion, women's spaces and spaces of life are organised around key emotions that permeated the space of the U3A and lives of its female members. They are also organised around lives of three

different women whose cases exemplify the power of those emotions and different enactments of womanhood in later life.

Belonging and passion

During one of the interviews at the U3A, Julia[1] told me the story of her first meeting with the U3A. Shortly after she decided to retire, she went for a long holiday to spend time with her daughter, who lived abroad. After her return home, she began to panic. She saw her husband going to work; she looked out the window only to see gloomy November days that looked like nights, and, for the first time, she had a lot of free time. She said that she was not ready for that. New objects began to enter her field of vision: old age, depression and futility. One day, she called her daughter to tell her that she was about to go crazy. It was then that one of her colleagues told her about the U3A. Ahmed (2006) shows those moments of losing one's orientation can be revolutionary; they may open new spaces and display new directions. However, for this to happen, a person needs to have access to different types of resources, including social and emotional resources. For Julia, work had been her main orientation. As she admitted, she used to work overtime, she did not have time for personal interests, and she liked what she was doing. When work disappeared, Julia lost her orientation. She also started feeling that she was running out of space, or rather, that different spaces were getting rid of her. Her friends provided her with new resources and helped to direct her towards a new space –the U3A. Julia saw that there was a world outside of her former workplace, that things were happening, and she wanted to be part of it. She gladly joined to realize that *"I have found my way for the second time in my life"*; the first time was when she decided on her occupation as a teacher. bell hooks (1994) discussing teaching as a practice of freedom points to the notion of passion as one of the key elements of such practice. Passion of experience and passion of remembrance (hooks, 1994:

[1] All names are fictional

90-91) are particularly built on suffering. Julia was one of many passionate women I met at the U3A. At the backdrop of societal hardship and obstacles, those women used their passion for teaching as a mobilizing force that could change lives of others. They not only talked about passion; their passion was also conveyed in the way they spoke, the way they looked at me, and the way I felt while interviewing those great educators.

Julia's story is about an emotional journey, it shows the great role of emotions in inhabiting spaces and directing oneself towards certain objects. It shows emotions that stick to certain objects and how these objects move bodies in different directions. This story also stresses the spatial aspects of our orientations; what would happen if Julia's friends had not been there? How would Julia have felt if she came back from visiting her daughter and it was a sunny day in May instead of a dark day in November? These questions do not aim at imagining different scenarios of Julia's life; on the contrary, they illuminate those aspects of the situation that Julia brought up when I asked her why she joined the U3A. Her daughter and friends were part of it as much as the nature and feelings of despair and loss propelled by the retirement decision and negative images of ageing were. In this particular situation, the U3A emerged as a safe harbour, a place where she could belong. Julia's friends wanted her to be happy; they wanted to help her overcome difficult times, and knowing her passion for teaching and learning, they directed her to the U3A. The U3A is an educational organisation, and educational goals are crucial to its self-presentation. Julia, who could not imagine life outside of school, found the U3A to be the right place for her. As she stated, she recovered and got her life back.

bell hooks (2009) writes about the notion of belonging that is mediated by the past. Her statement "Kentucky is my fate" (hooks, 2009:24) does not close her world. On the contrary, it reconciles her present with the past to enable a greater appreciation of spaces she has been inhabiting, and it opens a new world to her. It helps her to be open, to appreciate diversity and to

welcome change. Julia's fate is school. When friends told her about the U3A, she was curious and eager to try it. She began attending lectures, seminars, and activities. It was not long until she was approached by the U3A president and asked to take on some of the organisational duties. From organising recreational trips, she went on to inviting interesting people to speak at the U3A and eventually to becoming a member of the pedagogical board that sets the curriculum for the U3A. Julia says *"I like being with people, I like doing something for them … because it is important … selflessly, without any money, just like that*". To her, the U3A and its activity have meaning, and she sees her own participation as meaningful. "When the will to meaning is paramount, human life retains dignity" (hooks, 2009:29). Julia says that it means everything to her to hear when the U3A members say they have enjoyed a lecture and/or it has been beautiful.

She continues that it is about being a part of a group and doing things together. *"In a group, one feels better, more confident"*, adds Julia. That feeling of being a part of community was widespread. Stories of Julia and her colleagues point at the meaning of collectives in extending the bodies of old women into different spaces. When discussing the prevalence of racism in our societies, hooks (2009) writes about the creation of beloved communities that are open to difference and diversity and that make everyone welcome and enable one to belong. Stories of the U3A provided by its members were bursting with positive comments about the university, love for life and beauty.

"*U3A is a rescue for energetic people who like life*" and *"I think that U3A is a perfect form of building creativity in society and self-improvement in everyday life. It binds people to creativity"*

These are exemplary statements showing what the U3A means to people and how they feel about it. Stories provided by members of the U3A offer a picture of people who are happy with their lives. Older women belonging to the U3A, often began their stories of ageing with phrases

including 'I', 'me' and 'mine', which may provide information about their personal struggles against the view of older women. Ageist and sexist discourses do not differentiate between people; all old women are to be the same, invisible and redundant to the social world. With an 'I' statement, women I interviewed, acknowledged their particularity; they showed that there is no 'old women', but there are individuals whose lives vary. Hence, the U3A could be seen as a community of older women who want to be individuals in society that does not give them other opportunities to do so. The 'I' may be seen as revolutionary in this context. When an older woman says that this time in her life is: *"(…) only mine: 1) I do not need to do anything for anyone any more, for instance for family (children are on their own) or for an employer; 2) I want to do something good for myself (…)",* it can be interpreted as an act of revival. Patriarchal norms prevalent in the society and resulting from them relationships make women servants of others. When in late life the nature of these relationships changes, old women may for the first time be on their own. Clearly, we may be suspicious about the ideological underpinnings of such statements, but these express genuine feelings that organizations, such as U3A, nourish.

Women's spaces

As discussed earlier, women in Poland are largely relegated to the private sphere. This practice refers to women of all ages; hence, to be an old woman in Poland is to become a grandmother. The public discourse clearly defines what women should and should not do. Women are consistently defined through the family perspective and the role of a mother is presented as the only 'natural' role for a woman. To be heard, women need to struggle to enter the public space at first. However, this does not stop them from entering the public spaces entirely.

In particular, the community/grassroots level provides spaces for women's activism. Studies investigating the situation of working women in Poland, show that women are very active in

protecting and fighting for their rights (see Hardy, 2009). Similarly, feminist awareness and the number of feminism movement participants are increasing. Women do enter the public sphere and try to become comfortable there. As Penn's (2005) research on the Solidarity movement demonstrates, women do more than that; it is just that their voices and stories are silenced. During my visits to the U3A, I met women who were running the organization and without their engagement the U3A would not have been able to conduct its project.

During interviews, older women I talked were proud to be women. They could present a number of positive qualities that characterised women and explained their activity at the U3A. Curiosity, vigour, imagination, management skills, and multi-tasking are just a few of these positive qualities. As many said, it was more natural for women to take part in such activities because they are used to doing many things at once, often without financial benefits. They became engaged in various projects and programmes because they felt good about them.

One of the women, Patricia, I interviewed was involved in many initiatives; she was a member of the U3A, and she also worked as a volunteer for a non-governmental organization that worked towards improving the quality of life among older people. Patricia said that she became interested in joining those different activities because, upon her retirement, she wanted to do something else, to try out something new and, maybe, to achieve some dreams that she could not fulfil earlier. She used to work as a secretary, and as she stressed, that job taught her how to approach and please people. She saw that as a positive aspect of her identity, which became particularly valuable once she embarked on various social initiatives during her retirement period. When she joined the U3A, she started the Sabbath club:

"just like witches … (…) we decided that it would be a club for women, who would do things that they could not do earlier during their occupational career, or earlier life, that they would realise themselves".

Patricia said that the main thing that triggered that initiative was a very negative image of old women, who were seen as grandmothers who could not dress beautifully and who did not care about their physical appearance at all. She did not agree with this image and decided to work towards changing it. In light of this, the name Sabbath can be seen as a very bold and brave statement that both challenges and provokes. The historical figure of a witch is not something that women need to avoid; on the contrary, they can build on it, embracing their independence and interdependence with other women. In calling for women to stand for themselves and their age, Greer (1992), quoted at the beginning of this paper, urges them to become witches, to embrace that archetype to free themselves from oppressive chains of sexism and ageism. Witches that Patricia talked about were those who wanted to express themselves, to reach for their dreams and be happy about it.

For Patricia it was the world of fashion that tempted her throughout her life, but only upon retirement she decided to take some decisive actions. Patricia came up with the idea of organising a fashion show in which members of the club would present different outfits for women. She said that the most important thing to show was that

"It is not that a grandma walks with a crutch, and she is useless; it is exactly the opposite, she is useful, she is active, she is elegant, pretty, nice, well-dressed, educated, and so on. This was our aim"

The show was very successful. It was also fully covered by the media, which was Patricia's main intention. Local TV and press took part in the show, interviewed models and commented on the new image of old women. Patricia said that she was surprised by the positive effects of the event. It was at that time that she was contacted by a NGO to join a new project. After the first project, others came, and she has been involved with the organisation for over three years. She has always been interested in fashion; she enjoyed beauty and wanted to be surrounded by beautiful people.

Her plea to change the image of old women did not involve any beauty standard that women should adjust to; on the contrary, she wanted to promote different looks that are positive and beautiful. As Twigg (2013) argues the relationship between old age and fashion is complex, and as much as clothes could be viewed as ways of controlling ageing bodies, they may become a source of joy and fun. To Patricia, the promotion of the latter became a driving force. With her passion and commitment, she managed to break one of the main fears of becoming an older woman: invisibility. Her activity was focused on making older women visible, opening new spaces to them and opening eyes of others to notice and acknowledge the presence of older women in social spaces.

Spaces of life

Desire or the "art of living intensely" (Braidotti, 2006: 190) is seen as one of the prime forces of humanity. Braidotti (2006) discusses it in terms of a positivity that sets goals for the future. Patricia and Julia are among many who share a commitment to other people, who can imagine things that have never happened before, who can engross themselves in what they do to focus on unity with others rather than on themselves. More than anything else, they create spaces of life for many who have been refused the right to be respected members of various public spheres.

Braidotti (2006), reflecting on the notion of affectivity, talks about a Spinoza-oriented, positive "force that aims at fulfilling the subject's capacity for interaction and freedom" (p.148). She discusses affectivity in terms of power but an affirmative type of power, power that comes as *potenia* (ibid.). She also identifies different types of artistic activity, such as dance, music, and literature as the main forces of affirmation. These activities nourish the process of becoming that involves being open towards others, connecting and interacting with the outside, which is also an ethical project. In many stories that were told at the U3A, people talked about the possibility of

realising themselves, about reaching for their dreams and being open to new experiences and people. These were stories of becoming.

When talking to the U3A members, I often heard stories of various artistic activities pursued there. Not only were formal classes centred on artistic activities, but there were also many informal groups and clubs focused on poetry, painting, and music. People talked about the creativity, positive energy, love and joy that they experiences at the U3A. Many juxtaposed these experiences with their previous impressions, contesting that a new world had been opened to them; or as one of the researched persons said, *"I started my life when I entered the U3A*". Nancy, who talked about her passion for the idea of U3A, also stressed the value of art in her life. She specialised in making floral collages, although she also enjoyed painting. She emphasised that art gives life its meaning, and it simply helps one to be alive. Similarly to Patricia, Nancy showed her interest in beauty and its value to human life. Yet, to her, it was the art which was the main source of many aesthetic experiences. During our interview, Nancy was keen on sharing her way through the world of artistic activity and stressing the great importance it had in her later life. She gladly described many of her works and exhibitions during which she could present them to the public. It became clear that observing reactions of others, each time her commitment and passion or what she was doing grew. The following words from an anonymous author became her motto:

"Not only is creativity a source of joy, but it gives a promise of personal fulfilment as well. It heals. It strengthens biological and psychic functions. It teaches how to love loneliness. It removes stress. It boosts your self-esteem. It enriches your physical and spiritual strengths. It helps to be alive."

Nancy talked a lot about the value and meaning of art in her life, but also in lives of other members of the U3A. Because she could not remember exact words, she decided to send me a letter with the above quote. She wanted to make sure that I would read these words, not only to

able to understand her but also to learn from it and keep it as a source of inspiration for the choices I am about to make.

The theme of rescue, a safe harbour, or new life was very common among participants and members of both organisations. In several cases, stories of survival were described, where the activity of the U3A, virtually changed someone's life and/or saved them from depression. To many, the moment of joining these organisations meant taking a new direction in life and changing their orientation. Vitality and intensity became qualities that people embraced and could transfer to others. The "*Life is beautiful*" phrase was very common among people taking part in this research. The affirmative force of this statement should not be downplayed. It appears to represent the moment of connection with the outside world, which has both ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Braidotti (2006) discusses spaces of becoming that are conditioned upon blurring the boundaries between the self and the other, which produce new meanings and are built collectively. The phrase 'spaces of life' accentuates the situation in which people are told that their lives have ended, but they do not feel that way. They want to live. Thanks to U3A such spaces seemed to be opened for many. How did they come about? It was not the organisation itself but rather various affirmative forces and emotions that moved people in different directions and oriented them towards new objects that seem to lie at the heart of their very existence.

Conclusion

Ahmed (2006), discussing the process whereby different bodies take up spaces they are not supposed to, stresses that this is a moment that can break the chain of mere reproduction of facts and lead to the emergence of new qualities. Bodies of older women are often relegated to the space of invisible; they are consistently removed from the public spectre. Examples presented in this paper demonstrate the active role of older women who decided to create new spaces for

themselves and other older women. The space of the U3A was created with an intention of sharing and co-habitation; it became a space of positivity where older women could discover their individual "I". Yet, every individual "I" emerges with another "I"; it is the process of gathering that gives them the opportunity to stand out. This is the type of transformation that Ahmed (2006) foresees when observing similar bodies standing together to give voice to one another and being oriented towards each other to offer mutual support. In this, the results of this study extend the research on older women's associations and their meaning and value in later lives (see Hutchinson et al. 2008; Radina et al. 2008) by demonstrating that such endeavours may exceed frames of improving individual wellbeing and lead instead to a greater societal impact.

The women whom I met dared to be women, each of them a different type of a woman. They enjoyed this period in their lives because they were free, and they felt that they could do everything. They did not have to work anymore, they did not have to care for a family anymore, and they felt that they could conquer the world. The space of the U3A became a space for women's activism and of embracing their womanhood. These women wanted to enjoy all aspects of their lives. What they protested against was a one-dimensional way of perceiving the lives of old women. For instance, they enjoyed being grandmothers. Julia mentioned that the moment when she became a grandmother was one of the most important in her life. Likewise, Patricia enjoyed being with her granddaughter, and she treasured moments when her granddaughter asked her for advice. However, being a grandmother was only one of many roles for these women; with their stories they show that they have interests, ambitions, friends and families whom they love and want to enjoy time with. Similarly, the family sphere was important in their lives, but so were other social arenas.

Brief exerts of the life stories that are presented in this paper demonstrate the need for extending our ways of thinking about older women. Above all else, they urge us to feel differently.

Somehow, it became easier to imagine the hardship, to sympathize with those whose lives are filled with daily struggles and oppression than to allow oneself to be taken by the outburst of positive emotions that span through various stories. We tend to be more suspicious, more cautions and more doubtful when approaching stories of joy, pride and passion. Yet, for many, these are the emotions that mobilise. Are these less political than negative emotions, such as anger? We are yet to see. Or perhaps, we will never see as these are channelled differently. The positive emotions presented in this paper tend to be about us, and they say little about 'The Other'. There is passion for, there is joy in, there is happiness about, but never against. Surely, many of the stories demonstrate the struggle, many begin with referencing to 'The Other', many contain negative emotions that are equally important to initiating something new. Yet, the presence of the positive is what makes these stories move forward, the presence of the positive is what makes these stories complete.

The stories of older women referred to in this study were created in the society that consistently reinforces the unequal conditions between men and women. The term 'democracy with a male face' is a widely discussed phenomenon describing the situation of women in Poland. However, what this study, alongside discussed earlier research by Penn (2005) and Hardy et al. (2008), demonstrates is that women do take an active role in creating the social reality. They keep on entering the public spaces to mark their presence and to become visible. Yet, much of this happens at the individual level, and the general lack of solidarity among women often impedes any attempts to change the gender order in Poland (Środa, 2010). By emphasizing the importance of the positive, the results of this study may offer a different perspective on the organization and mobilisation of women of all ages in Poland.

References:

Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*. London: Duke University Press.

Arber, S. & Ginn, J. (1991). *Gender and later life: a sociological analysis of resources and constraints.* London: Sage Publications.

Balcerzak-Paradowska, B., Chłoń-Domińczak, A., Kotowska, I.E., Olejniczuk-Merta, A., Irena Topińska, I. & Woycicka, I. (2003). The gender dimensions of social security reform in Poland. In E. Fultz, M. Ruck, S. Steinhilber (Eds.), *The Gender Dimensions of Social Security Reform in Central and Eastern Europe: Case Studies of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.* (pp.187-313). Budapest: International Labour Organization.

Bernard, M. Meade, K. & Tinker, A. (1993) Women come of age. In M. Bernard & K. Meade (eds.) *Women come of age*. (pp. 167-190), London: Edward Arnold

Braidotti, R. (2006) *Transpositions*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Calasanti, T. M. (2007). 'Bodacious Berry, Potency Wood and the Aging Monster: Gender and Age Relations in Anti-Aging Ads'. *Social Forces*, 86 (1): 335-355.

Calasanti, T. M. & Slevin, K. F. (2006). Introduction. Age matters. In T. M. Calasanti & K. F. Slevin (Eds.), *Age matters. Realigning feminist thinking*. (pp. 1-17). London: Routledge.

Calasanti, T.M., Slevin, K. & King, N. (2006). Ageism and feminism: from "Et Cetera" to center. *NSWA Journal,* 18(1), 13-30.

Estes, C. (2006). Critical feminist perspectives, aging, and social policy. In J. Baars, D. Dannefer, Ch. Phillipson & A. Walker (Eds.), *Aging, globalization and inequality: the new critical gerontology.* (pp. 43-58). New York: Baywood Publishing.

Fodor, E. (2006). Gender mainstreaming and its consequences in the European Union. *The Analyst,* 1-16.

Fodor, E., Glass, Ch., Kawachi, J., Popescu, L. (2002). Family policies and gender in Hungary, Poland, and Romania. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies,* 35, 475-490.

Gal, S. & Kligman, G. (2000). *The politics of gender after socialism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Garner, J. D. (1999). Feminism and feminist gerontology. *Journal of women and aging,* 11(2), 2-12.

Glass, C. & Fodor, E. (2007). From public to private matrenalism? Gender and welfare in Poland and Hungary after 1989. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society Advance,* 14(3): 323-350.

Graff, A. (2001). *Świat bez kobiet: płeć w polskim życiu publicznym*. Warszawa: W.A.B.

Graff, A. (2008a). *Rykoszetem: rzecz o płci, seksulaności i narodzie.* Warszawa: W.A.B.

Graff, A. (2008b). Gender, sexuality, and nation- here and now. Reflections on the gendered and sexualised aspects of contemporary Polish nationalism. In E.H. Oleksy (Ed.), *Intimate citizenship: gender, sexualities, politics.* (pp. 133-146). London: Routledge.

Graff, A. (2010). *Magma.* Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.

Greer, G. (1992) *The change: women, ageing and the menopause.* London: Penguin

Grenier, A. (2012) *Transitions and the lifecourse. Challenging the constructions of 'growing old'*. Bristol: The Policy Press

Hardy, J. (2009). *Poland's new capitalism.* London: Pluto Press.

Hardy, J., Kozek, W. & Stenning, A. (2008). In the front line: women, work and new spaces of labour politics in Poland. *Gender, Place & Culture,* 15(2), 99-116.

Hatch, L.R. (2005). Gender and ageism. *Generations,* 19-24.

Holstein, M. (2006). On being an ageing woman. In T. M. Calasanti & K. F. Slevin (Eds.). *Age matters. Realigning feminist thinking.* (pp. 313-334). London: Routledge.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom.* New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2009). *Belonging: a culture of place.* New York: Routledge.

Hurd Clarke, L. (2011) *Facing age: women growing older in anti-ageing culture*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield publishers, inc.

Hurd Clarke, L. & Griffin, M. (2008). Visible and invisible ageing: beauty work as a response to ageism. *Ageing & Society,* 28, 653-674.

Hutchinson, SL. Yarnal, CM. Staffordson, J. and Kerstetter, DL. (2008). Beyond fun and friendship: the Red Hat Society as a coping resource for older women. *Ageing & Society*, 28, 979-999

Koivunen, A. (2010). Yes we can? The promise of affect for queer scholarship. *Lambda Nordica,* 3/4, 40-63.

Krekula, C. (2007). The intersection of age and gender: reworking gender theory and social gerontology. *Current Sociology*, 55(2), 155-171.

LaFont, S. (2001). One step forward, two steps back: women in the post-communist states. *Communist and Post-communist Studies,* 34, 203-220.

Lange, M. & Frątczak, E. (2010). Day care services for children in Poland 1980-2008. In V. Kucharova, H. Haskova, J. Valkova, A. Gyarmati, D. Szikra, E. Fratczak, M. Lange & D. Gerbery (Eds.), *Manka Goes to Work: Public Childcare in the Visegrad Countries 1989–2009*. (pp. 96-106). Budapest: Budapest Institute for Policy Analysis, Available: http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/manka_goes_to_work_2010.pdf.

Levy, J. A. (1988). Intersections of gender and aging. *The Sociological Quarterly,* 29(4): 479-486.

Liang, J. & Luo, B. (2012). Toward a discourse shift in social gerontology: From successful aging to harmonious aging. *Journal of Aging Studies* 26(3): 327-334.

Love, H. (2010). Feeling bad in 1963. In J. Staiger, A. Cvetkovich & A. Reynolds (Eds.). *Political Emotions. New agenda in communication,* (pp. 112-133). London: Routledge.

Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching. 2nd edition.* London: Sage Publications

Marody, M. & Giza-Poleszczuk, A. (2000). Changing images of identity in Poland: from the self-sacrificing to the self-investing women? In S. Gal & G. Kligman (Eds.), R*eproducing gender: politics, publics, and everyday life after socialism.* (pp. 151-175). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Penn, Sh. (2005). *Solidarity's secret: the women who defeated communism in Poland.* Ann-Arbor: University Of Michigan Press.

Phillips, J & Bernard, M. (2001) Women ageing. Changing policy, challenging practice. In M. Bernard, J. Phillips, L. Machin and V. Harding Davis (eds.) *Women ageing. Changing identities, challenging myths.* London: Routledge, pp. 168-178

Plomien, A. (2009). Welfare state, gender, and reconciliation of work and family in Poland: policy developments and practice in a new EU member. *Social Policy & Administration,* 43(2): 136-151.

Porter, B. (2005). *Hetmanka* and mother: representing the Virgin Mary in modern Poland. *Contemporary European History,* 14(2): 151-170.

Ray, R. E. (1999). Researching to transgress: the need for critical feminism in gerontology. *Journal of women and aging,* 11(2), 171-184.

Radina, M.E., Lynch, A., Stalp, M.C. & Manning, L.K. (2008) "When I Am an Old Woman, I Shall Wear Purple": Red Hatters Cope with Getting Old, *Journal of Women & Aging*, 20 (1/2), 99-114,

Rukszto, K. (1997). Making her into a "woman": the creation of citizen-entrepreneur in capitalist Poland. *Women's Studies International Forum,* 20(1), 103-112.

Russell, Ch. (2007). What do older women and men want?: gender differences in the lived experience of ageing. *Current Sociology,* 55 (2),173-192.

Sandberg, L. (2013). Affirmative old age- the ageing body and feminist theories on difference. *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, 8(1): 11-40.

Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity*. London: Duke University Press.

Steinhilber, S. (2006). Gender and welfare states in Central Eastern Europe. Family policy reforms in Poland and the Czech Republic compared. In S. Razavi, & S. Hassim (Eds.), *Gender and social policy in a global context: uncovering the gendered structure of 'the social'*. Geneva: UNRISD & Palgrave/McMillan.

Szkira, D. (2010). Eastern European faces of familialism: Hungarian and Polish family policies from a historical perspective. In V. Kucharova, H. Haskova, J. Valkova, A. Gyarmati, D. Szikra,

E. Fratczak, M. Lange & D. Gerbery (Eds.), *Manka Goes to Work: Public Childcare in the Visegrad Countries 1989–2009*. (pp. 83-95). Budapest: Budapest Institute for Policy Analysis, Available: http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/manka_goes_to_work_2010.pdf

Środa, M. (2010). *Kobiety i władza*. Warszawa: W.A.B.

Tarkowska E. (2002). Intra-household gender inequality: hidden dimension of poverty among Polish women. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 35(4), 411-432.

Twigg, J. (2013) *Fashion and age: dress, body and later life*. London/New York: Bloomsbury

Twigg, J. (2004). The body, gender, and age: feminist insights in social gerontology. *Journal of Aging Studies,* 18, 59-73.

Ward, R. & Holland, C. (2011). 'If I look old, I will be treated old': hair and later-life image dilemmas. *Ageing & Society,* 21, 288-307.

Williams, S. (2001) Emotion and Social Theory: Corporeal Reflections on the (Ir)rational.

London, UK: SAGE

Woodward, K. (1991). *Ageing and its discontents: Freud and other fictions.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Woodward, K. (ed.) (1999) *Figuring age. Women, bodies, generations,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Woodward, K. (2009). *Statistical panic: cultural politics and poetics of the emotions.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Zielińska, E. (2000). Between ideology, politics, and common sense: the discourse of reproductive rights in Poland. In S. Gal & G. Kligman (Eds.), R*eproducing gender: politics, publics, and everyday life after socialism.* (pp. 23-57). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.