

**Katarzyna Suwada\***

Polish Academy of Sciences

## NEW PENSIONERS AND THE SURROUNDING SOCIAL REALITY. THE EXPERIENCE OF RETIRING IN POLAND

The article deals with the issue of retirement in contemporary Polish society. The analysis is based on a qualitative research project conducted with people who had formally retired within the previous five years. The process of retiring is one of the most important turning points in the life course. The aim is to look more carefully at the experience of the initial years of retirement and the process of adjustment to a new social status. The article seeks to answer questions regarding how new pensioners comprehend and function in the current social and institutional settings, in particular how they perceive the process of changes and rebuild their relations with the younger generations.

Keywords: new pensioners, retirement, ageing, Polish society, postfigurative culture

### INTRODUCTION

Although the process of ageing is a universal process for all human beings, it is at the same time culturally and socially diversified. This article seeks to explore the experience of retiring in the Polish society at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I am interested in experiences of *new pensioners*, i.e. individuals who formally retired within the last 5 years, and seek to answer the question of how they comprehend and deal with the surrounding social reality. People employ various strategies to adjust to a new situation and a new social status connected to retirement. The adopted strategy is a result of various factors that impact an individual's life: it depends on an individual's education, gender, occupation, type of previous employment, family situation, health, and financial situation, among others. Yet even though people's experiences of retiring differ considerably, I argue that all new Polish pensioners have to function within one institutional context of the Polish welfare state system. In the process of retiring they have to go through a similar formal process of reaching the retirement age<sup>1</sup>

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\* Corresponding author: Katarzyna Suwada, Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, ul. Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warszawa.

<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that the retirement age is different for women and men, and is lower for some privileged occupations, everyone approaches it at some point of their life.

and becoming formally retired, the procedure of calculating of their pension, and finally get used to their new social status. Besides, the generation of new pensioners has completely different life experiences than the younger generations. First, people retiring today in Poland are those who entered the labour market under the previous communist regime and then had to adapt to the new capitalist system and new working conditions, post-1989 (Bugajska 2005: 58–61). They experienced the political and social post-communist transformation as participants in the changing labour market. Most of them had to transfer from the public sector to the private. Some of them decided to start their own companies and hire other people. Others became unemployed as a result of the transformation. I assume that these experiences had a significant impact on their relations with the subsequent generations born after 1989 who are too young to remember the previous system. Secondly, the new pensioners observe and function in a social reality that is under processes of significant and permanent changes. Contemporary sociologists often underline that we are living in times of rapid and constantly accelerating changes. Zygmunt Bauman (2010) calls the current times a *liquid modernity*, with liquidity serving as a metaphor of times in which nothing is stable and unchangeable. The contemporary times are characterised by the processes of individualization, informalization and globalization. What is more, the development of new technologies affects the organisation of everyday life and work as well as interpersonal relations. All of these are often hard to understand for the elderly, who grew up and are used to functioning in completely different social settings.

Taking all of these into account, this paper aims to analyse how new Polish pensioners comprehend the surrounding social reality. Margaret Mead in her book *Culture and Commitment* (1970) distinguishes among three types of culture, taking into account the relations between generations. In a *postfigurative culture* children learn from their forebears. A *configurative culture* is characteristic of societies in which children and adults learn from their peers, while in a *prefigurative culture* adults learn from younger generations. Contemporary times should be described as a prefigurative culture: it is easier for younger generations to deal with the constant changes and understand current social settings, and are thus obliged to explain them to their parents and grandparents. I assume that the character of these intergenerational relations has an impact on how the elderly function in the society and how they perceive the contemporary times.

## METHODS

The research study conducted in 2012 is based on forty individual interviews with people who had formally retired within the last five years<sup>2</sup>. To construct the most heterogeneous sampling group four criteria were taken into consideration. First, the type of employment and

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<sup>2</sup> The research project was funded by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Narodowy Program Rozwoju Humanistyki) and was carried out at the AGH University of Science and Technology. The project was conducted in cooperation with Łukasz Krzyżowski, Wojciech Kowalik and Anna Pawlina.

the character of occupation were included. Four categories of new pensioner were distinguished based on their previous situation in the labour market:

- 1) individuals who were once employed under a full-time contract,
- 2) people who used to be self-employed, i.e. the owners of small companies, freelancers or farmers insured by the Social Insurance Institution (Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych),
- 3) individuals who used to hold privileged occupations, i.e. those that give the right to early retirement,
- 4) people who had not been active in the labour market for at least five years before acquiring the right to retirement (for example housewives, people on long-term health benefits, the unemployed).

These people were not eligible to pre-retirement benefits for various reasons. The second criterion was based on the time when the interviewee decided to retire. In this case we took into consideration whether the pensioners decided to exercise their right to the early retirement or retire having reached the statutory age. A small majority of the interviewees retired earlier. Eleven people continued their paid work while receiving retirement benefits. Thirdly, the family situation was important, in particular whether the respondents had children and grandchildren: most of the interviewees had grandchildren, but took care of them differently. The fourth and final criterion was gender. We assumed that the process of ageing and retiring is highly influenced by gender beliefs and diverse expectations towards men and women. Thus we sought to recruit the same number of men and women, but in the end the sample group consisted of 16 men and 24 women.

The sampling procedure was aimed at choosing the most heterogeneous sample group. 26 interviews were conducted in small and big cities and 14 in rural areas. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 42 to 72. All of them varied in their occupation and type of employment (self-employment, public or private sectors, unemployment), age of retirement, level of education, place of residence, family situation, and health condition. Interviews were mostly carried out in the interviewees' households. All of them were transcribed with the protection of confidentiality. The research was conducted from the ethnographic perspective using the methodology of the grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This means that in interpreting the interviews for the analysis presented in this article, I have searched for patterns and thematic features in the interviewees' experiences and feelings regarding ageing and retirement. In my treatment of the interviewees' subjective accounts, I analytically brought out and organised meaningful relationships and characteristics. This selection process followed an inductive analysis model, in which a continuous interplay between the theoretical perspective and the grouping and categorising of the data is stressed. I tried to interpret the meaning of individuals' behaviour and find out what they think and feel as they are in the process of retiring.

It should be noted here that even though the research project concentrated on the experience of retiring, in this article the issue of retirement as such should not be seen as a core topic. I instead seek to describe the attitudes new pensioners have towards contemporary Polish society and in this context see how the symbolic beginning of old age is experienced in Poland at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## RETIREMENT AS A TURNING POINT

Retirement is undoubtedly one of the most important turning points in the individual's life course and it is frequently perceived in terms of loss. As Christina R. Victor claims:

Retirement is a complex phenomenon and it is probably far too simplistic to divide people into the retired and non-retired. Rather adoption of the new social role of 'retired person' is a complex social process, which may be divided into a series of phases in a clear implied parallel with the stages of bereavement: again another linkage of the notion of retirement as a major loss in the life of the individual (Victor 2004: 212).

In such a perspective retirement should be seen as a social process, as a complex transition that takes time. A "retiring person" has to get used to a new social status and social roles that are no longer connected with their participation in the labour market and the type of occupation. Today in the capitalist societies paid work is one of the most important dimensions of an individual's life. One's occupation and position in the labour market often serve as a base around which the individual develops their identity and organises their life. Paid work frequently determines where people live, how they organise their time and when they go for holidays, but also what kind of lifestyle they adopt, when they have children, and how they see their roles within the society. This is in particular the case of adult men, who often perceive themselves in terms of their occupational position, or in case of a father being the main breadwinner for the family (Fairhurst 2003; Faludi 2006). However, for women, participation in the labour market is now becoming a crucial aspect of their lives as well. On the one hand, it is often unavoidable for economic reasons, but on the other hand, engagement in paid work is more often perceived as a way of achieving success and self-realization. Therefore, retirement might be perceived as a loss of the most important aspects of ourselves.

As Victor notices, the role of a *retired person* is based both on rights and obligations. The major right is that the pensioner receives financial support from the welfare state without being stigmatised as "lazy" or as a "cheater". The obligations are less evident, "but include not seeking 'formal' paid work and, in a society imbued with the 'work ethic', to keep busy" (Victor 2004: 212). Yet, I argue that in the Polish context the situation seems to be different. The right to receive financial support does not mean that all pensioners receive benefits sufficient to afford a comfortable life. As a consequence, even in retirement they are *obliged* to seek out paid work. Similarly, obligations largely depend on the financial and family situation, as well as the health condition of the retired person. An important dimension is gender and the social expectations based on gender beliefs (see: Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway 2009), in particular towards women who, due to the lack of care institutions in Poland, are often expected to provide care to their grandchildren and older parents. In such situations, many Polish pensioners are obliged to provide different types of services to their family members. In a way it means that they *are obliged to keep busy*, yet these obligations are often not a result of their own decisions and preferences, but rather are imposed on them as a consequence of the external settings (such as a lack of places in kindergarten, unemployment in the family, ill parents).

Retirement is not necessarily linked with a transition from work to non-work, but rather a transition from full-time to part-time paid work or unpaid work (Fairhurst 2003: 31).

Keeping in mind the perspective of *postfigurative culture*, the new pensioners have to learn how to function in a changing society in line with these social expectations. This might be especially difficult if one believes that retirement should be a time of rest and tranquillity. As Nancy R. Hooyman and H. Asuman Kiyak (2008) underline, one of the key issues in the process of retirement is a sense of controlling the situation and of agency. Thus, externally imposed obligations might not always be perceived as positive and acceptable. They are often not congruent with the cultural image of a retired person, who has a right not to work and to slow down and rest after a busy life.

## VARIETY OF RETIREMENT EXPERIENCES

The research indicates that the experience of retiring and ageing varies greatly. People have different approaches in life and handle the moment of retiring differently. Thus, it is impossible to point to one model of retirement in the Polish system. In the book *Młodzi emeryci w Polsce (New Pensioners in Poland)* (Krzyżowski et al. 2014: 121–142) based on the same research, we distinguish four retirement strategies characteristic of the new pensioners. The interviewees were divided into four categories according to two dimensions that in our opinion are important to understand the experience of retirement from the perspective of individuals. The first dimension is the attitude to paid work during retirement, and based on that we divided our respondents into two groups – those engaged in different forms of paid work and those totally withdrawn from the labour market. The second dimension was the level of satisfaction. And although it should rather be seen in terms of a continuum, it is possible to categorize every person as satisfied or dissatisfied, as even the ones who fall in the middle of the continuum tend to lean to one side. As a result, we have distinguished four categories of new pensioners:

- 1) those active in the labour market and satisfied with their life situation,
- 2) those active in the labour market, yet unsatisfied with their lives,
- 3) those economically inactive and satisfied with their lives,
- 4) those economically inactive and unsatisfied with their situation.

In this article I seek to analyse how new pensioners in Poland approach and comprehend the surrounding social reality. The experiences of those within the four categories distinguished above vary greatly. People organise their lives differently after retirement, have diverse approaches to the continuity of paid work and define their roles in the context of ageing differently. Yet, although the interviewed individuals had highly various life experiences, they all function in a common social reality, Polish society at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and they also share one institutional context of retirement, the Polish social policy system and its pension system. These common social and institutional contexts together with their shared experiences regarding the post-communist transformation have an impact on how the interviewed pensioners perceive and describe the surrounding social reality and changing character of interpersonal relationships.

The picture that is drawn from the interviews is rather bitter and depressing. In fact, the attitudes of new pensioners to the contemporary world are usually not positive. The people we interviewed were very sceptical about contemporary times, the Polish government, the younger generations and in general other people. They frequently do not fully understand the changes and processes that are occurring and consider them as negative.

The interviewees often described in their narratives how it is to live in contemporary times and compared the current situation with the times of their youth. Since they belong to the generation of people who experienced the post-communist transformation and who started to work in the labour market within the previous system, they have an opportunity, based on first-hand knowledge, to compare how the times have changed since then and to formulate their own opinions about the positive and negative sides of the capitalist democratic system. They mostly make a general evaluation of the contemporary world and society, as they refer to values held today and how they have changed over recent decades, and underline the changing character of social relations and family life. They portray the younger generations in comparison to themselves and their peers. In such a way they describe the world in which they are living and indirectly describe themselves in the context of a changing society.

In my analysis, I distinguish five elements of the social reality that were the most often discussed by the interviewees. I believe they are also important given the concept of the post-figurative culture. First, I show how they perceive the contemporary times in the context of the post-communist transformation, what changes and continuities they have observed. Secondly, I present their opinions about the changing character of interpersonal relations, both those within the kinship system and relations between friends, colleagues or neighbours. Thirdly, there is a focus on the younger generations and the relationships the new pensioners have with them. Fourthly, I briefly present the attitudes to the Polish pension system and consequently to the politicians and the government which are often blamed for the poor economic situation of the elderly. Finally, there is an analysis of the ways the interviewees understand and deal with new technologies, opinions about which are strongly connected with a broader process of change in contemporary times and the changing character of interpersonal relations.

### “IT USED TO BE EASIER WHEN I WAS YOUNG”

According to the interviewees, contemporary times are increasingly difficult, mostly because of increasing changeability and uncertainty. Since the narratives concentrate on the process of retirement, they extensively described the current situation in the labour market. The issue mentioned most often was the problem of high unemployment rates, especially of young people who have problems with finding full-time and stable jobs.

People are lucky they can work for years in one company. They know everything and can handle all obligations. If some new things appear, they can learn and work with them. **But the situation of young people nowadays? I don't know how they can work like that. How can they work?** Although they are young and healthy, they would like to have a family, to have a stable life...now you have to be available 24/7. To have a family, you need to hire a babysitter, so you need to

earn enough for her salary. You can't do it differently. It's not a good situation (Paulina, female, 59 years old).

In such ways the interviewees present themselves as a generation of people whose situation was better in their youth. After having completed school, they could find a stable job with a sufficient salary to start a family and live comfortably (yet at that time a comfortable life meant something else than today). The contemporary system does not always guarantee the young the proper conditions to start an adult life, therefore many of the interviewed individuals feel responsible for helping not only their own adult children, but also others. This sense of responsibility manifests in different ways. Some of the pensioners retired only because they knew if they wanted to work longer, a younger colleague would lose their job. A similar approach is characteristic for people who run their own small businesses. They often decided to continue their work during retirement, because they were aware that it would be very difficult for their employees to find different jobs. So such pensioners see their decision to stay in or leave the labour market as one that might affect others. Besides, many of the interviewees decided to work during retirement to support their children who were unemployed or in a difficult financial situation.

I could close this business tomorrow, but then... Sylwia [her employee – KS] is very young, another girl is now on parental leave, Ola has just given birth to a baby, **and if I close the business, it means I have to fire all the employees and they will be without work**. On the other hand, I have to [financially] help my daughter (Bożena, female, 63 years old).

Some of those who did not deal with a dilemma whether to work or not to work, because of the situation of the younger generations, often decided to withdraw from the labour market, because of the poor working conditions frequently offered to those who look for a job.

I feel like I could work a little longer. I could, but not under these conditions we have now. It is said that people work all day, from dawn to dusk...without any insurance, without any certainty about tomorrow. I wouldn't like to work like that, but if it were like it used to be when I was young, then why not? (Dominik, male, 61 years old)

The difficult conditions provided by the contemporary labour market are linked with the capitalist system introduced after the fall of communism. The neoliberal market is the one to blame, according to my interviewees, for the poor situation of younger generations. The growing competitive nature of individuals, increased focus on money and success, migration, short-term contracts and low wages are seen as a result of the post-communist transformation. In many narratives, it was underlined that in the previous system one was working for life in one company and his/her salary, although not very high, was usually enough to provide a comfortable life. Most people were in a similar financial situation, therefore there was no need to compare one's situation to those of other people. The new system brought growing social inequalities and resulted in mistrust and envy.

And then when democracy came, then it was like... society became so rapacious, one is looking at the others to see... people are spying on each other to see what they have, and before people were less concerned, nobody cared what you had (Jan, male, 63 years old).

## “PEOPLE USED TO BE DIFFERENT, MORE OPEN”

Together with a growing insecurity and uncertainty in the labour market, the interviewees also notice the changing character of interpersonal relations, both within the family and within the broader communities. They believe that in the contemporary Polish society people are too concentrated on themselves, do not care about friendships and other individuals, and are not able to be selfless and willingly help others. This process of increasing individualisation is often described in comparison to the previous system, which in general is not perceived as a good one, but in which people were more open towards their local communities and were less focused on themselves.

You know, I preferred... the previous times were more difficult, the queues and stuff like that, but I preferred the old times. This life was somehow different. Now everything is so isolated. When I was a child, people used to be different; they used to be more open. And now everyone is locked in their cage, nobody is out, nobody is talking to the others. Life used to be different. I have some neighbours, but I don't visit them (Anna, female, 65 years old).

I am not talking about the regime. I am talking about people, the society used to be different. People helped each other. Now everyone closes their door and watches...you can see it even on the street. I have just picked up the grandchildren [from the kindergarten] and these signs: “you are under surveillance”, “private premises”. It is written everywhere: “private property” (Bożena, female, 63 year old).

Accordingly to the interviewees, people have changed because of the surrounding social reality and the new capitalist system. There is a common belief that a changes in the labour market made the society more concentrated on money and private possessions. The world is currently based on the principle of competition and thus there is no place for selflessness and kindness. In fact, the participants in this research observe the process of individualisation that has been already described by many sociologists (Bauman 2010; Giddens 1991). They do not, however, fully understand it: they are distanced from such a world and do not perceive it as theirs, although they admit that they behave in accordance with the new “rules”.

The issue of weak social ties is the most problematic when it comes to changing relations within the family. Although in many narratives actual family relations are described as less than ideal, for many people the family is seen as the most important social group within which everyday life is taking place, the one which guarantees emotional and financial/material support in any kind of situation, especially the most difficult ones. Consequently, they accuse the younger generations of not being involved in the family and not taking care of family relationships.

Young people think that everyone is independent and this is how it works. And I think it is not like that. A family is still a family. Nobody will help you, if you need it – only the family. Of course there are other people, but to whom do you turn for help? Only to the family... (Antoni, male, 65 years old).

The critique of the younger ones is often based on the assumption that due to the growing informality of interpersonal relationships they do not show enough respect for the elderly. Yet interestingly, the family conflicts described in the narratives rarely occur between elder and

younger. In contrast, the greatest tensions usually arise between peers – in particular adult siblings who often cannot agree about who should provide care work for their older parents, or who fight over inheritances. The relationships with the children are often presented in terms of mutual support, frequent communication and love.

### “THE YOUNG ARE SO CYNICAL”

Despite rather good relationships between different generations within the family, as well as the abovementioned sense of responsibility for young people, a generational conflict is apparent, particularly in the narratives about relations with the young colleagues from work. The most basic issue is the problem of the lack of respect for elderly people. It is quite often that new pensioners claim that it is hard to communicate with the young.

Young people – they are convinced they know everything. They respect neither teachers nor elderly people. They think they know more and they should have everything. And this is very bad, with some people I have a very unpleasant experience, they are so cynical and I wonder why (Elzbieta, female, 65 years old).

This lack of respect is reaffirmed by the conviction that the younger generations do not take care of interpersonal relations, cannot create deep friendships and do not care about the local community they live in. Some of the interviewees are not eager to become involved in any kind of relations with younger people because of bad previous experiences. They prefer to be socially isolated just to avoid unpleasant situations. In fact such an approach may increase their social exclusion and reinforce their negative attitudes to the younger generations.

The generational conflict may also be observed within the family relations, yet as already mentioned it is not very common. It is especially evident in case of men who are living in intergenerational households. Leaving the labour market often means that they have to transfer their role of the main breadwinner to someone else – usually to their children or children-in-law. This might be a source of conflict, especially when an elderly man does not want to resign from the right to make most decisions about the household and family life. In families with grandchildren, the additional problem of children arises. Usually, the parents decide by themselves how they bring up their own children, yet the participation rate of both grandmothers and grandfathers is sometimes very high. In such situations men are particularly eager to criticise the ways their grandchildren are raised – they believe that children should be obedient and their relations with the older ones should be based on authority.

Of course I put rigor [on the grandsons]. These boys run like clockwork in my presence. And my daughter – she is much more diplomatic: “you shouldn’t do that, because...” and they are not listening to her. You have to sometimes... I mean, I am not really keen on yelling and beating, but sometimes being tougher is good. And she is like...she does not allow them to watch TV or play on the computer and that doesn’t work. The child should be afraid of its parents (Jan, 63 years old).

On the other hand, the critical attitude towards the younger generations, their values and lifestyles does not diminish the abovementioned sense of responsibility. Interestingly,

most of the narratives about the contemporary times are full of sympathy for the younger generations who have to function in the difficult contemporary labour market and often face not only instability, but also poverty. The issue of poverty is particularly evident in the interviews with the parents of adult daughters who are single mothers. In such situations, the new pensioners are often forced by the external conditions to work after retirement – they feel obliged to help their daughters and their grandchildren, since their pensions and additional salaries serve as important financial support for the young women (on the feminization of poverty in Poland see: Arber, Davidson and Ginn 2003; Blicharz 2014; Loretto and Vickerstaff 2013; Tarkowska 2000). Given a difficult life situation, the problem of generational conflict becomes less relevant.

### “I’D LIKE OUR LOVELY GOVERNMENT TO SWITCH WITH US FOR ONE MONTH, ONLY ONE MONTH”

The experiences of retirement and ageing in general are not regarded as positive ones, especially taking into consideration the institutional context. On the one hand, the new pensioners claim that the previous system provided easier life conditions to start an adult life than the current one provides for young people today. On the other hand, the welfare state system also negatively impacts their lives.

The very dark picture of contemporary times drawn by the new pensioners is strictly connected with a low level of social trust, in particular in the state institutions and politicians. In general elderly people are more conservative, and in the interviews they often declare that they support the right wing party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice). This, however, does not mean that they trust the right-wing politicians. All politicians are described as stupid, uneducated, hypocritical, and focused only on money, their careers and the party’s interests. They are also viewed as insensitive to social injustice and poverty. In fact, many of the interviewees think that the welfare state system is constructed only to benefit politicians (who usually earn plenty of money) and does not provide proper living conditions for their citizens, regardless of their age, sex, education, occupation and so on. One of the biggest problems, beside the uncertainty of the labour market, is the problem of an insufficient health care system, long queues to the medical specialists, expensive medicines, and a lack of institutions providing care work for the most elderly. The difficult living conditions cause new pensioners to believe that the government and politicians have no idea about the lives of the regular citizens.

My dear, I’d like our lovely government to switch with us for one month, only one month. We would take their salaries, and they would take our pensions and transfer to our lives. I would like them to show us how to live, how to pay rent, buy medicines and survive. I would give them the lowest pension. I want nothing more, just to show them how it is. When someone is living alone, he has to pay rent, bills, buy medicines... it is impossible. For two people is easier, but as a single person...? (Anna, female, 65 years old)

Interestingly, it seems that even these pensioners who were granted quite high benefits frequently do not treat them in terms of financial stability. They feel that in times of rapid

changes the rights they were granted on the basis of their long participation in the labour market might be readily taken away.

On the one hand, I am glad I have this pension from my work with the police; it is one fixed thing in these uncertain times. Yet on the other hand, you never know. I am not sure if it is going to be paid all the time. Some kind of crisis might come and they stop paying pensions, or make them lower, who knows? (Piotr, male, 53 years old)

The level of insecurity of people who due to low benefits are forced to work after retirement is even higher. They do not worry only about their deteriorating health conditions that eventually might prevent their engagement in paid work, but also the changing institutional mechanisms that might constrain their future participation in the labour market.

I am afraid that one day someone will decide that the pensioners are not allowed to work, that he will say “you have a pension, why do you work?” It is possible and this is what I am afraid about – these politicians. I don’t like the fact that they try to say what we should do. (Gustaw, male, 67 years old)

On the one hand, new pensioners feel ignored by politicians, who do not recognise their needs and their poor living conditions. On the other hand, they are afraid of the institutional mechanisms and political decisions that might hinder their already bad life situations. This lack of recognition on the part of politicians and the government has a negative impact on the level of social trust and new pensioners’ visions for their future. The system, in particular in cases of poor and unemployed pensioners, makes the elderly withdrawn from social life and does not allow them to fully participate in the consumerist society. The frustrations are reinforced by the widespread access to the media that shows lifestyles characteristic of other European societies. Polish pensioners are aware of the fact that in other European welfare states the elderly can afford a comfortable life, holidays, trips abroad and so on. In such context, their situation seems to be unjust. As a social group they feel ignored by the government.

In this context the attitudes of new pensioners to the recent changes in the pension system that raise the retirement age to 67 are interesting. Even though the new regulations do not apply to the interviewees, they have very negative opinions about them. First, they think that in times of high unemployment of young people, this decision is irrational from the perspective of the labour market<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, they underline that after having worked for many years, the elderly person may not have enough strength to continue working. They believe people should have a choice regarding how long they want to work. They do not accept the system having such a strong influence on their decisions. The extension of the retirement age is seen as a particularly problematic in the case of women, who used to be expected to work until age 60. The extension to 67 is often described as unfair from the perspective of grandchildren who are deprived of the right to be taken care of by the grandmothers.

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<sup>3</sup> The research shows that the relations between the retirement age and the rates of unemployment are more complicated (Gruber and Wise 2010), yet the interviewees are not aware of these facts. Instead they repeat the common myth that appears in everyday conversations and sometimes in the mass media.

## “I DON’T USE THEM. I’M TOO OLD”

The last important characteristic of contemporary times discussed in the narratives is the rapid development of new technologies. The interviewed pensioners vary in their abilities to use them. Many had learned how to use computers and the Internet in their workplace before they retired. Many use mobile phones in everyday life. On the one hand, they understand that the positive role of new technologies in the contemporary world – the easy access to information through the Web, the convenience of having a mobile phone that allows for frequent and simple communication. Yet, on the other hand, they have a very critical approach to some new technologies. Mobile phones are compared to a leash that constrains their freedom. Computers and the Internet are seen as useful only in terms of work, and many of the interviewees do not see them as necessary to a household. The new technologies, together with the neoliberal labour market, are often accused of destroying relationships between people, not only among the younger generations, but also their own relations.

I believe that everything is a little bit too fast and some people are so concentrated on these gadgets that they isolate themselves. I remember times when we didn’t have mobile phones, computers and we met more often with friends than today. Even without cars. (Eryk, male, 51 years old)

The drawbacks of these devices is that it consumes so much time, because they are sitting in front of them all day and night. And then they have problems with their eyes and spines. Instead of sport activities, they are sitting and staring at a monitor. And they are looking for inappropriate websites, the children learn very bad things there and mothers and fathers don’t know about it. (Jola, female, 65 years old)

## CONCLUSIONS

The picture of the contemporary times and contemporary Polish society is not optimistic. It seems that the experience of retirement and ageing is connected with a growing isolation and lack of understanding of the surrounding social reality. The above analysis clearly shows that they keep a distance from the surrounding social reality and they critically assess the Polish welfare system, in particular the situation in the labour market and the Polish government. They do not understand all the social changes that have been occurring for the last few decades. Given the terms proposed by Margaret Mead (1970), the current culture should be described as a *prefigurative culture*, in which adults learn from their children. Today the young teach the elderly how to function in society, they show them how to use the new technologies and explain people’s behaviours and the changing systems of values. The contemporary world distinctively differs from that in which new pensioners grew up and attained adulthood. In all likelihood, it might be incomprehensible for them and could be characterised as unfriendly and unfamiliar. Thus, unsurprisingly the elderly distance themselves from a society that, as they assume, does not learn from their knowledge and experience.

The process of retirement usually greatly impacts people’s identity and self-perception. I claim that the interviewees often reconstruct their identities in opposition to the contemporary

society and the younger generations (Biggs 2006). In such context, new pensioners would define themselves as individuals that take care of interpersonal relationships and are focused on family life and family relations. Besides, they present themselves as more conservative than the younger ones and more attached to traditional values and norms. My aim is not to answer the question if this diagnosis is relevant; I am more interested in the fact that through underlining their conservatism, attachment to family life and the old order, they describe themselves in terms stereotypically characteristic of the older generation. It means that to some extent they identify themselves with the elderly and link the process of retirement with the process of ageing. It might result in their growing social isolation. It also creates a false impression of existence of two separate worlds of the young and the elderly. In reality these worlds overlap each other.

Elderly people are often considered as a risk group that is exposed to social isolation and exclusion (Victor 2004: 168–172; Weiss 2005: 93–112). Although withdrawal from social life is not necessarily characteristic of all of the interviewees, it must be noted that a critical approach to the surrounding social reality, poor relations with other (in particular younger) people, as well as the sense of being ignored by the government might lead to social exclusion in older age. This is particularly important in the context of an ageing society. From the perspective of the Polish welfare state there is a need to create more friendly conditions for the elderly in Poland, not only in terms of financial stability, but also opportunities to be more engaged in social life.

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#### MŁODZI EMERYCI W OTACZAJĄCEJ ICH RZECZYWISTOŚCI SPOŁECZNEJ. DOŚWIADCZENIE PRZECHODZENIA NA EMERYTURĘ W POLSCE

Artykuł podejmuje problem przechodzenia na emeryturę w dzisiejszym społeczeństwie polskim. Analiza oparta jest na badaniach jakościowych, przeprowadzonych na grupie osób, które formalnie przeszły na emeryturę w ciągu ostatnich pięciu lat (tzw. młodzi emeryci). Proces przechodzenia na emeryturę jest często uznawany za jeden z najważniejszych punktów w życiu jednostki. Celem badania było dokładne przyjrzenie się temu doświadczeniu, a dokładnie pierwszym latom bycia na emeryturze i procesowi przystosowywania się do nowej sytuacji. W artykule podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, w jaki sposób młodzi emeryci postrzegają i funkcjonują we współczesnych warunkach społecznych i instytucjonalnych, a zwłaszcza – w jaki sposób postrzegają zachodzące zmiany społeczne i budują relacje z młodszymi pokoleniami.

Słowa klucze: młodzi emeryci, emerytura, starzenie się, kultura postfiguratywna