



**PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES
ON HEALTH AND DISEASE**

**VOLUME 2
MANIFESTATION AND DIAGNOSES OF HEALTH
CONDITIONS**

Krzysztof Kielkiewicz

Editor

UEHS Press
Warsaw
2019

REVIEWER

Prof. **Malgorzata Tatala**, PhD, Institute of Psychology, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

EDITORIAL BOARD

Konrad Janowski, PhD, Institute of Psychology, University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw, Poland

Krzysztof Kielkiewicz, PhD, Institute of Psychology, University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw, Poland

Dmytro Bielov, PhD, the Center for Ukrainian and European Scientific Cooperation, Department of Constitutional Law and Comparative Jurisprudence of SHEI “Uzhhorod National University”, Ukraine

Piotr Kalowski, MSc, Faculty of Psychology, Warsaw University, Poland

ISBN 978-83-66552-05-0

University of Economics and Human Sciences Press
59 Okopowa Street
01-043 Warsaw, Poland

© University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw, 2019

Aleksandra Szymanowska

Institute of Psychology

University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw, Poland

korwisz@wp.pl

Time perception in late adulthood

Introduction

The number of people over 60 years old is constantly increasing in European countries, including Poland. With the number of young people simultaneously decreasing. This leads to a reflection on factors conducive to the physical and mental health of the elderly. According to numerous studies, *temporal perspective* has a significant impact on human functioning. The current chapter presents the results of research carried out on a sample of elderly people. Attempts were made to determine whether the perception of the past, present, and future is affected by factors such as death of a spouse, participation in religious practices, or not having changed one's place of residence.

According to demographic forecasts, by 2050, the Polish population will decrease by over 4 million. At the same time, its demographic structure may change. This is connected with a decreasing birth rate on the one hand and longer life expectancy on the other. As a result, the number of retired people will significantly increase over the next decades.

In 1995, it was estimated that 60-year-old men will live to 75.8 years and women—to 80.5 years. In 2005, the life expectancy of men aged 60 was projected at 77.5 years, and women—at 82.7 years. In 2017, it was 79.2 for men and 84.3 for women. Both the average age of Poles and the number of people past working age are increasing. In 2005, it amounted to 5885000 and it is expected to increase to 8540000 in 2020 (and to 9597000 in 2030). Women past working age predominate, both due to earlier retirement age and longer life expectancy (Statistics Poland, 2004, 2018).

It must be emphasized that the elderly should remain active after retirement by developing their interests and passions for which they did not have time before, maintain social relations with a group of friends and acquaintances, and remain in close relationship with

family, especially young people to whom they can pass on the traditions cultivated by their families, the community in which they live, or the country of which they are citizens. They cannot live in the past, regardless of whether they have good or bad memories, but they must live in the present and continue looking toward the future.

The research presented in this study was aimed at determining how people aged 60+ perceive time psychologically and what factors affect this perception.

Characteristics of Late Adulthood

Old age, currently termed *third age* or *late adulthood*, is a time when a person who is still active, both physically and mentally as well as professionally and socially, gradually falls out of their roles and slowly loses strength. However, there is no concrete moment in the biological development of the body which defines the beginning of old age. Nowadays, especially in industrialized countries, people are living longer due to developments in medicine and improvements in living conditions. Therefore, the socially defined period of old age begins later than before.

In ancient Greece, Pythagoreans assumed that 60 is the beginning of old age, whereas Chinese philosophers believed that it began at 70 (Rembowski, 1984, p. 41). Birren, adopting various criteria for the periodisation of human life, including the anatomical, physiological, psychological, and social, defined the period of late adulthood as 50-75 years, and old age as beginning at 75 (qtd. in Rembowski, 1984, p. 42).

According to Okła, quality of life in old age does not depend on the biological condition of the body, but on the individual arrangement of personality traits and the social context (qtd in. Kurtyka-Chałas, 2014, p. 41). A subjectively experienced high quality of life is maintained by social activity adequate to one's abilities, having friends, family contacts, the opportunity to meet emotional needs, developing one's interests, and so forth.

According to Havighurst's theory, each stage of life involves various tasks that require solving. In the late maturity stage, a person must adapt to a decline in their physical strength, retirement, and reduced income. They must also accept the possibility of their

spouse's death, maintain social relations with people their age, accept and adapt to changed social roles, and arrange living conditions according to their needs and abilities (Przetacznik, Gierowska & Tyszka, 1996, p. 69).

According to Braun-Gałkowska (1987, p. 185), losing the ability to perform various social roles may be sometimes experienced by older people as very difficult and can cause a dual response: (a) complete withdrawal from life and resignation from activities, explained by lack of strength, lack of ability to influence events, or even the feeling of not being needed anymore; or (b) preserving the previous way of life despite changes in abilities.

Many gerontologists stress the importance of socializing for seniors. Unfortunately, people met in their youth or adulthood pass away over time, and the number of family members decreases. The decrease in the number of contacts with friends and acquaintances may, however, result in a deeper bond with a spouse or a long-term partner, as well as with the younger generation.

Unfortunately, withdrawal from life is often facilitated by the prevailing social attitudes, especially among young people, who value youth, health, fun, and wealth. There are cases when they insult older people, for example, saying "when I see such a woman, I would shoot her in the back," "into the oven with old people," "tell me why is she still alive," and so forth. (Krzemińska, 1980, s. 54). Wiśniewska-Roszkowska (1989, p. 35), summing up a book by Simone de Beauvoir, describes a grim picture of old people presented by this novelist. Old people may not be hungry or emaciated, but they often may feel spiritual hunger, a lack of affection, and of kindness. They are ridiculed and humiliated. They are not respected and loved and, therefore, are not happy.

In their youth, people set life goals and create plans that they try to achieve in adulthood. In old age, however, they take stock of life. If the result is a positive balance, if they have managed to achieve the goals they set for themselves in their youth, they may feel fulfilled. But if they come to the conclusion that they have not done anything valuable in life, that their life was mostly empty and meaningless, or when they experienced only defeats, they may feel overwhelmed by apathy and try to blame others for their unsuccessful lives.

When Holmes and his group worked on their theory of stress, they conducted interviews to study which life situations in adulthood cause the most stress. Many such situations were mentioned by the interviewees, for example, job loss, change of residence, or loss of property, but the decisive majority considered the death of their spouse as the most stressful (Zimbardo & Ruch, 1988, p. 363).

Holmes' theory, combining stress with a particularly difficult situation, has not resisted criticism. However, the loss of a spouse is still considered a major stressor in the commonly accepted theory of stress by Lazarus and Folkman (Heszen–Niejodek, 2011). In line with this theory, when a widowed person is unable to cope with this loss, they always experience strong stress. However, the intensity of the experienced stress depends on many factors.

Stress intensity and the period of mourning depends on the sex and age of the widowed person, the relationship they had with the deceased spouse, as well as the activities they must take over after their death.

For a person who has children, is employed, or has a group of devoted friends, losing a spouse is a major blow. It causes sadness, regret, pain, sometimes guilt, but after a period of mourning, that person comes back to life and to regular functioning. Such a situation is more difficult for people whose children have left home, who are retired, or who do not have a group of friends providing them support in difficult times. Usually, being in a long-term relationship with another person, sharing joys and sorrows, as well as caring for them was the meaning of life. The death of a spouse thus divides life into two categories: before and after their death. The *before* can often be idealized, whereas the after can be perceived as sad, empty, or even tragic.

If the bond between the widowed person and their spouse was not very positive, long-term care as well as participation in their prolonged death can be interpreted as a release from a difficult situation, an opening to new experiences, as well as an opportunity to make significant life changes.

Psychological Time

In recent years, interest in time perception has clearly increased among psychologists. Time as a phenomenon is experienced by

everyone, though it is experienced differently by various people. Temporal psychology concerns the subjective, personal experience of time. According to Sobol-Kwapińska (2011), there are many definitions of time: a series of changes which exist only as a mental representation except for the present; a memory trail, or anticipation.

According to Nosal, who is one of the main representatives of temporal psychology in Poland, time is considered as a specific form of information organized by specific mental models. These are cognitive structures integrating various conceptual categories—dimensions of time representation and attitudes towards time (Nosal & Bajcar, 2004).

Zimbardo and Boyd believe that "the perspective of perceiving time is a personal attitude—often unconscious, which each of us manifests in relation to time. It is also a process in which the continuous flow of life is divided into time categories, helping to give our life order, coherence and meaning" (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2014, p. 24).

In psychology, the subjective relation to time is called the *temporal dimension of personality*. There are three types of temporal dimensions: future- (prospective), present-, and past-oriented (retrospective). Specific types of temporal dimensions are associated with specific behaviours and attitudes towards life (Sobol & Oleś, 2002). According to Oleś (2011), if the temporal perspective is distant, a person believes themselves to have time to start implementing new activities, acquire new competences, and develop skills. However, if the temporal perspective is short and one sees their life as being determined and impossible to change, past experience gains significance. Results of some studies show that in general, regardless of age, people think more about the future than about the past, but many studies also show that older people are more focused on the past than on the future, in contrast to young people, who turn more often to the future than to the past (see Sobol-Kwapińska, 2011).

As noted by Zimbardo, well-known for his social experiments, but less known for his studies on time perspective, a happy person who has good interpersonal contacts and is open to new experiences, is living in the present, but not cutting themselves off from the future and not fleeing to the past.

The past can be perceived as a series of positive experiences or as a series of misfortunes, regardless of what it actually was. To function efficiently, one cannot completely cut the past off. However, one cannot also live only in the past.

People who live with a positive attitude towards their past like to reflect on pleasant, nostalgic memories. Their present reality is interpreted through past experiences. They are optimistic about life, but their present and future are of little interest to them.

People with a negative picture of the past treat their whole life as a failure. They no longer remember what was interesting and happy, but they still remember the harm they have suffered from the hands of others and the failures they have experienced. They see the world as unpredictable, and other people as indifferent, unkind, and envious. They often see the present fatalistically and they avoid making plans for the future.

For most people, the most important perspective is that of the present and future. However, people with positive past experiences are open to new experiences in the present and the future, have a sense of agency, believe in themselves, do not fear new tasks, have satisfying contacts with family and friends, make plans for the future, and are happy with life and with themselves.

For people who have a negative past perspective, the present often has, as was mentioned above, a fatalistic dimension. Since they have failed in the past, they lack faith that they can succeed in the present or in the future. They are superficial, impatient, distrustful, inactive, closed to new experiences, and often focus on their ailments, which may be sometimes exaggerated.

According to Zimbardo, there is also one extra category—that of present-day hedonists who do not care about the past and do not look toward the future. They live only for the present moment. They are characterized by their desire for pleasure, which is why they look for exciting activities. They are cheerful and carefree. They do not like routine and chores (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2014).

To help people improve their psychophysical functioning, especially if they are stuck in a negative perception of the past, Zimbardo developed the Time Perspective Inventory, which allows

for determining the respondent's time perspective. On the basis of the questionnaire results, a psychotherapy plan can be suggested.

Research Methodology

The current research was undertaken to determine how Poles perceive time and on factors influence this perception. The study included people aged between 19 and 60. A group of high school graduates, students, people aged 26–35 (residing in Poland and England), people aged 35–59, and people aged over 60 were examined.

The results presented in this study are related to people of retirement age. It is essential to understand the factors which influence perception of time (present and future) by elderly people, as it is assumed that the number of people over 60 years of age who—according to predictions—could live at least a dozen years more, is increasing.

Research Method

The study used the Polish experimental adaptation of Zimbardo's Time Perspective Inventory, made by Przepiórka (2014). It includes minor changes of the original version. The questionnaire consists of five subscales — past negative, past positive, present hedonistic, present fatalistic, and future. Zimbardo also highlighted the transcendental future, but it was not included in the questionnaire.

Ideal results reflecting good mental health, a sense of happiness, and satisfaction with life involve low scores in the perception of negative past and fatalistic present, as well as high scores in the perception of positive past and slightly above-average perception of hedonistic present and future.

In addition, the respondents completed the Questionnaire of Life Attitudes by Klamut (2002) and a survey collecting demographic information.

Characteristics of Respondents

There were 66 women and 25 men among the respondents. The group of women comprised 30 widows and 27 nonwidows, mostly married (for 9 women, there was no data on their marital status). The age of the women

ranged from 61 to 87 years. Among the widowed women, there were slightly more older women. The average age of the widows was 75.8 and non-widows – 73.4. The age of the men was between 63 and 88 years old. The age distribution of the studied women is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Age	Widows (n = 30)		Nonwidows (n = 27)		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	%
61–65	1	3.3	8	29.7	15.8
66–70	8	26.7	10	37.0	31.6
71–75	6	20.0	7	25.9	22.8
76–80	8	26.7	2	7.4	17.5
81–85	5	16.7	-	-	8.8
86 and above	2	6.6	-	-	3.5
Total	30	100	27	100	100
Average age = 75.8		Average age = 73.4			

Results

At the current stage of the study, it was impossible to define whether age affects time perception, as the group of respondents over 60 years old was insufficiently large. Marital status is one of the variables that can affect time perception, therefore, it was checked whether time perception differentiates widowed and non-widowed women. The results obtained in the individual subscales of the Time Perspective Inventory are ranged from 1 to 5 points. Table 2 presents means and standard deviations obtained by the examined groups of women.

Table 2

Time perspective	Means and Standard Deviations of Widowed and Nonwidowed Women				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	Widows (n = 30)		Nonwidows (n = 27)			
	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Past negative	3.33	0.75	2.77	0.94	3.29	< .05
Past positive	3.50	0.68	3.36	0.48	-	> .5
Hedonistic present	3.00	0.72	3.00	0.72	-	> .5
Fatalistic present	3.11	0.59	2.72	0.90	3.25	< .05
Future	3.42	0.41	3.43	0.451	-	> .5

The results show that a negative perception of the past and a fatalistic perception of the present significantly differentiated widowed and non-widowed women. Widows have a much worse perception of the past—perhaps due to the loss of a spouse, excessive burden of responsibilities related to raising children and work, or a lack of support from a close person, most often the spouse. Statistically significant differences were also found in the fatalistic perception of the present. Widowed women, who often are left alone after their children become independent and who have finished their professional life perceive the present time in a more fatalistic way than do people who have not lost their life partner. As P. and J. Chauchard (1977) stated, "it is not good to grow old alone, although this solution is easier, because the old age often intensifies the lack of communication which is connected with human nature. Dialogue and authentic communication are a must in life..." (p. 174).

The results obtained by all the surveyed women differ from the "ideal" results presented by Zimbardo. The greatest differences involve the present fatalistic as well as past negative and past positive perspectives.

Due to the insufficient number of widowed men, their results were not included in the analysis. Among the non-widowed women, the lowest results in the past negative perspective ($x = 1.3$) were obtained by an unmarried woman aged 68, with a university degree and a doctorate, still working professionally. She was a positive person, full of plans for the future. As a manager of a university team, she constantly developed new ideas. She had high self-esteem and believed that what happens to her was due to her work and skills. She had a strong bond with her family, whom she was constantly helping not only financially, but also by dealing with many difficult matters. She also helped many other people. Thinking about the past, she returned to positive experiences among friends, which she gladly recalled. She was an agnostic, but respected believers.

Among the group of widows, the highest results in the past negative perspective ($x = 4.1$) were obtained by two women. One of them, 72, with secondary education became a widow at the age of 30. She worked for 40 years until she retired. After the death of her husband, she had to take care of her children. She did not have close friends. She had never been involved in any nonprofessional activities. She

lived alone, although she maintained contact with her children and grandchildren whom she supported financially. However, she believed that the family, especially grandchildren, keeps in touch with her mainly because she shares her pension with them. She spent her time talking to her neighbours. She went to the cinema sometimes. She considered herself a believer, but not a practitioner. She assessed her current life as sad, difficult, and without joy.

The second woman who also obtained very high results in the past negative perspective was a woman aged 63, with a vocational education. She had been a widow for about 20 years. She lived alone, but her daughter and son visited her often. She knew that she could count on them and they could count on her in financial matters. She met her friends and neighbours once a month. She spent her time reading newspapers and watching TV. She had never been involved in any other activity besides work and homework. She assessed her current life as filled with work and care, but also deprived of joy. She declared herself as a nonpractitioner.

The study also focused on the differences between women and men in their perceptions of the past, present, and future, as it is widely believed that women cope better in life and are more resistant to life difficulties. These results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Women and Men						
Time perspective	Women (<i>n</i> = 66)		Men (<i>n</i> = 25)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Past negative	3.00	0.85	2.96	0.78	0.201	.84
Past positive	3.42	0.60	3.33	0.52	0.650	.52
Present hedonistic	3.00	0.72	2.95	0.58	0.306	.76
Present fatalistic	2.9	0.75	3.12	0.69	1.252	.21
Future	3.42	0.41	3.36	0.57	0.539	.59

On the basis of the obtained results, it may be stated that differences in time perspectives among the surveyed women and men over 61 years of age are similar and statistically insignificant. Both women and men in this age group perceived the past, present, and future similarly. It does not mean, however, that such differences do not occur among younger generations, especially among people aged 25–35 and 36–59.

The study also included the analysis of attitudes towards religion and its influence on time perspective among women older than 61 years (see Table 4).

Table 4

**Perception of Time and Attitude Towards Religion
In Women Aged 61 and Above**

Time perspective	Believers and practicionaires (n = 24)		Believers and nonpracticionaires (n = 22)		Nonbelievers (n = 11)		F	p
	M	SD	x	SD	x	SD		
	Past negative	3.1	0.68	3.3	0.79	2.8		
Past positive	3.5	0.57	3.5	0.67	3.7	0.48	0.499	.610
Present hedonistic	2.9	0.64	3.2	0.72	3.1	0.76	1.099	.342
Present fatalistic	2.9	0.62	3.4	0.76	2.5	0.82	6.333	.003
Future	3.5	0.43	3.6	0.36	3.5	0.56	0.361	.699

A statistically significant difference was found in the present fatalistic perspective between regular believers and those declaring themselves to be nonpractitioners and nonbelievers. Faith in God and attachment to religion positively influenced acceptance despite difficulties, worries, and suffering which occur in life.

On the basis of the obtained results, it may be stated that having a close person to live with, being involved in professional work, or caring for grandchildren as well as following one's interests and hobbies allow the elderly to enjoy life and be open to new experiences in old age. Satisfying contacts with family and friends, as well as faith in God and regular participation in religious practices make their lives happier.

Inactive people who are living alone, are usually focused on their current life, perceiving it mainly in terms of failure that can no longer be rectified and the harm they suffered from the hands of fate and others. They usually have lower self-esteem and do not believe that their lives can change for the better. Moreover, they do not see their lives as meaningful. People who spend the last years of their life in social nursing homes are in a very difficult situation. Because of health, disability, and, above all, lack of a family that would support them, they must abandon the place where they spent most of their lives and live with strangers. What is more, they have to adjust to the regulations of the new institution. Table 5 presents the Time

Perspective Inventory results of people over 60 years old living in their environment and people staying in nursing homes.

Table 5

Perception of time and place of residence

Time perspective	People living outside social nursing homes (n = 66)		People living in social nursing homes (n = 30)		t	p
	x	SD	x	SD		
	Past negative	2.88	0.86	3.40		
Past positive	3.45	0.61	3.52	0.65	0.47	.63
Present hedonistic	2.97	0.82	3.14	0.62	0.93	.30
Present fatalistic	2.84	0.76	3.35	0.61	2.06	.04
Future	3.54	0.46	3.41	0.53	1.199	.13

The results show that negative past and present fatalistic time perspective significantly differs between people who, despite reaching retirement age are still independent (or receive such help and support from their families that they can still live on their own) and people who live in social nursing homes. Residents of nursing homes negatively assess their current life, despite the fact that nursing homes provide them with housing, food, medical, and rehabilitation assistance. Unfortunately, functioning well and enjoying life also involves other needs, which no institution can satisfy.

References

- Braun-Gałkowska M. (1987). *Psychologia domowa* [Domestic psychology]. Warmińskie Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne.
- Chauchard, P., & Chaucard, J. (1977). *Starzeć się we dwoje* [Growing old together]. I.W. PAX
- Heszen–Niejodek I. (2011). Teoria stresu psychologicznego i radzenia sobie [The theory of psychological stress and coping] In J. Strelau (Ed.), *Psychologia. Podręcznik akademicki* [Psychology. Academic handbook] (Vol. 3, pp. 465–491). Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.
- Klamut, R. (2002). *Cel, czas, sens życia* [The oal, time, meaning of time]. Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL
- Krzemińska, W. (1980). *Starość rośnie wraz z nami* [Old age grows with us]. Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.
- Kurtyka-Chałas J. (2014). *Starość i jej oblicza. Wybrane psychologiczne aspekty funkcjonowania osób starszych* [The faces of old age. Select aspects of psychological functioning of the elderly]. Libropolis.
- Nosal, Cz., & Bajcar, B. (2004). *Czas psychologiczny: Wymiary, struktura, konsekwencje* [Psychological time: Dimensions, structure, consequences]. Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii PAN.
- Oleś, P. (2011). *Psychologia człowieka dorosłego: Ciągłość-zmiana-integracja* [Psychology of the adult person. Continuity-change-integration]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Przetacznik-Gierowska, M., & Tyszkowa, M. (1966). *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka* [Psychology of human development]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN
- Rembowski, J. (1984). *Psychologiczne problemy starzenia się człowieka* [Psychological problems of aging]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Sobol-Kwapińska, M. (2011), *Kwestionariusz Metafory Czasu KMC Podręcznik* [The Time Metaphor Questionnaire. Manual] Wydawnictwo PTP
- Sobol, M., & Oleś, P. (2002). Orientacja temporalna carpe diem a poczucie satysfakcji z życia [The carpe diem temporal

- orientation and the sense of satisfaction with life]. *Przegląd Psychologiczny*, 45(3), 331–346.
- Statistics Poland. (2004). Statistical yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2004. Statistics Poland.
- Statistics Poland. (2018). Statistical yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2018. Statistics Poland.
- Wiśniewska–Roszkowska K. (1989). *Starość jako zadanie* [Old age as a challenge]. I. W. PAX
- Zimbardo P., & Ruch, F. L. (1988). *Psychologia i życie* [Psychology and life]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Zimbardo P., & Boyd, J. (2014). *Paradoks czasu* [The time paradox]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN
- Zimbardo, P. G., Sword, R. M., & Sword, R. K. (2013). *Sila czasu*: [The power of time]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.