SUCCESSFUL AGEING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG ADULTS IN POLAND

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Abstract. *On the basis of the theoretical and empirical analyses published in the scientific literature, it can be stated that the concept of successful ageing presented in educational discourses is understood differently by authors and it is focused primarily on three issues related to 1/ spirituality, 2/ well-being, 3/ a sense of community. The article discusses research results aimed at comparing ways of understanding successful ageing in the scientific literature with ways of defining this term by young adults in Poland. The survey participants are pedagogy students. The article attempts to answer the following questions: 1/ How do young adults in Poland understand the concept of successful ageing?, 2/ To what extent do the ways of understanding this concept, which have been distinguished based on the analysis of empirical data, coincide with a typology created based on a review literature.*
Data analysis (cluster analysis) enables to distinguish two types of successful ageing understood as a link between transcendence and generativity. The third type consists of elements of Rowe and Kahn model which are supplemented with good family relations.
Keywords: older people's quality of life, successful aging, third age.

Introduction: Concept of successful ageing – scientific and common definitions

The concept of successful ageing occupies a prominent position in the scientific research on elderly people. Thus, the successful ageing discussions are currently being held by the representatives of various scientific disciplines, including social sciences and humanities. The term "successful ageing" is widely used in the literature related to the health sciences, sciences of labour and social policy, as well as educational sciences (Kowaleski & Szukalski, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). Nevertheless, this term is understood differently by the authors. For example, Rowe and Kahn's successful ageing model is the most widely used approach in social policy (1998). It is assumed that successful ageing is firmly linked to active ageing (Szukalski et al., 2008, WHO 2002, EuroStat European Commission, 2012). Furthermore, activity in the elderly is considered an essential component of successful ageing. In addition, it is also emphasised that the activities undertaken in various spheres of life help elderly individuals enhance self-reliance, which alleviates the burden on society. According to this

point of view, participating in activities is an essential ingredient of the good quality of life in late adulthood. Rowe and Kahn (1998) identified 3 main components of successful ageing: 1. absence of the risk of disease and disability, 2. maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, 3. an active engagement with life. The researchers claim that it is combination of all three components in interaction with one another that is essential for successful ageing. From this perspective, successful ageing is understood as the result, the desired state of affairs, which can be determined objectively. Therefore, it is possible to ascertain objectively whether or not older individuals age successfully. In addition to Rowe and Kahn's model, the literature offers a number of other theories and concepts that describe successful ageing as a set of objective criteria. In fact, they expand the existing successful ageing model proposed by Rowe and Kahn. Martinson and Berridge (2015) point out that there is a significant number of such concepts in the gerontological literature. For instance, Crowther et al. (2002) firmly advocated the incorporation of spiritual dimensions into the model of successful ageing developed by Rowe and Kahn, Ko et al. (2007) expanded it by adding marital status and quality. Ng et al. (2009) defined successful ageing in terms of overall and physical health and well functioning cognitive functioning and emotional wellbeing, social functioning, life engagement and life satisfaction. Lee et al. (2011) proposed leisure activity. Others, such as Baltes and Carstensen (1996), argue that evaluating successful ageing requires both objective and subjective criteria. The research on the subjective assessment of quality of ageing conducted among older people revealed that the subjective assessments differ substantially from their objective counterparts (Jeste et al., 2010). In Poland, the research on the common definitions of successful ageing in different age groups was carried out by Halicki (2008) who placed particular emphasis on health state, relationships within the family and beyond. The research also shows that maintaining good family relationships seems less important for the oldest respondents than for younger age groups. Moreover, they rank independence as a relatively low priority. When understanding and interpreting common definitions of successful ageing, it is worth focusing on Halicki's reflections and insights (2008, p. 25). He notes that individuals in their late adulthood point out what their high level of needs are and they tend to ignore things that lie within their grasp. In consequence, such a phenomenon can be considered a major cause of divergence in the perception of the scientist and common paradigm of successful ageing.

Research findings revealing differences between the scientific and common definitions of successful ageing motivate and engage others in evaluating the definition incorporating objective criteria. It is therefore sensible to combine both objective and seniors' subjective perspectives (Jeste et al., 2010).

Considering successful ageing as a result, a set of criteria that must be met seriously limits our understanding of this concept from the perspective of educational sciences, because such an approach contributes to exclusion of individuals from scientific debates, due to e.g. disability that accentuates the reduced opportunities to achieve the perfect state determined by the previously stated criteria. On the one hand, the concept considered as a "result" is seen as a drawback (Villar 2012), but on the other hand, it may be noted that there is educational potential associated with understanding successful ageing as a "process". The model proposed by Baltes, Baltes (1990) suggests that successful ageing is the successful adaptation of elderly individuals to changes during the course of ageing, the minimization of losses, as well as the maximization of gains that occur over the entire lifespan. The model also shows how to maintain a functional level closely linked to the levels of activity in the earlier stages of life. Furthermore, resilience is viewed in a similar way, according to Harris (2008). In this sense, successful ageing (resilience) involves a continuous process of adaptation to incremental changes of everyday life. From the perspective of educational sciences, both research aimed at improving the level of functions that significantly deteriorated in old age and research addressing the emergence of new qualitative forms of developmental phenomena in the elderly (and not just those that are compensatory in nature) deserve to be emphasised. Development and change are the essence of the theory of gerotranscendence proposed by Tornstam (2005). The theory presents the way older people perceive themselves as they age and react to the world around them.

It can be assumed that the subjective (common) definitions of successful ageing seem to revise with age or changing life situations. Therefore, the perceptions of individuals about successful ageing can change as a result of their reflections on life experiences. Revising the subjective definition of successful ageing can affect both seniors' way of life and the choices of factors considered important, in particular of and educational nature. In addition, it is generally supposed that intentional learning undertaken by individuals in old age (auto-education) of the elderly is connected to the subjective definition of successful age. Older people's perceptions of the concept of successful ageing appear to be strongly related to the engagement of seniors in activities. For example, individuals who experience difficulties accompanying old age (e.g. physical disability) tend to change their perspective on the concept of happiness, highlighting the spiritual dimension and viewing the physical dimension as less important. As a result, the individuals still feel satisfied with their lives despite their physical disabilities. It is also possible to get involved (educational) activities aimed at achieving an ideal state presented in the subjective definition of successful ageing. In this case, the activities focus on spirituality and being able to concentrate on non-material reality, which includes developing a greater

understanding of new challenges and difficult situations in life, even exhibiting a decreasing interest in material things and reducing emphasis on one's own "self" (Straś-Romanowska, 2001; Tornstam, 2005). Such activities can take some forms, which may be seen as individual or community engagement in religious practices, engagement in religious organisations and contemplative engagement. Thus, transcendence, which is seen as outreaching "real self", is their inherent element (Heszen-Niejodek & Gruszczyńska, 2004).

In educational discussions concerning ageing, the authors often describe actions taken up by those people related to learning, aiming at achieving harmony with themselves and the outside world. On the ground of research, they also give guidelines as to what kind of actions should be taken in order to favour development and enhance the level of life satisfaction. According to scientific publications, the elderly may influence the context and circumstances in which their learning takes place. They can do it through social interactions, participation in organizations and self-development. Such purposeful creation of one's own space and conditions in which learning might take place is called the creation of one's own educational environment (Kozerska, 2012, 2013, 2015). On the grounds of a qualitative analysis of scientific articles (Kozerska, 2015), it can be stated that the authors dealing with subject matter regarding learning in the late adulthood, focus on three types of shaping educational environment by the elderly: 1. The type oriented towards commonality (an individual creates conditions favoring self-learning within frames of actions targeted at common weal); 2. The type oriented towards spirituality (an individual creates conditions favoring self-learning within frames of actions targeted at outreaching 'real self' – transcendence); 3. The type oriented at one's own well-being (an individual creates conditions favoring self-learning within frames of actions targeted mainly at one's own well-being, for example one's own health, one's own happiness or one's own skills).

The types described above represent three different kinds of subjective definitions of *successful ageing* that can be referred to the authors of publications under analysis:

1. *Successful ageing* seen as being a part of a community,
2. *Successful ageing* seen as outreaching 'real self' (transcendence),
3. *Successful ageing* seen as living out one's own well-being.

There can also be differentiated ways of comprehending the notion of successful ageing in literature, being a combination of two or three abovementioned main types with an emphasis on one of them as a more meaningful one.

Aim of the research

Assuming that the action taken up by an elderly person depends on an accepted subjective definition of successful ageing, from the point of view of educational sciences, the answers to the questions: what types of subjective definitions of successful ageing function in the society, how much they change together with the age of individuals and how much they depend on other variables (e.g. experienced crisis situations, family or material situation, the level of education, etc.), might seem interesting.

It may also be interesting to analyse what kind of subjective definitions of successful ageing are formulated by young people and how much they differ from definitions formulated by the elderly.

The analyses presented in the article form a part of research on subjective definitions of successful ageing carried out in various age groups. There has been selected and described a subset consisting of young adult people- students of pedagogy. This is a group that is quite familiar with scientific discussions in literature regarding lifelong learning on account of the field of their study. The purpose of this research is to check as to what extent the definitions of successful learning, distinguished on the basis of literature analysis, correspond to the students' conceptions in this respect. The following questions have been asked in particular:

1. What is the way of understanding successful ageing by young adult people studying pedagogy?
2. To what extent the ways of understanding the notion of successful ageing by young adult people studying pedagogy correspond to the taxonomy of definitions of successful ageing created on the basis of literature review?

Research methodology

1. Data collection

The article presents data findings carried out among 107 students of pedagogy. The age of the respondents: M=21, s=1,9; gender: 90 females (84 %), 8 males (7,4 %), 9 (8,4 %) people did not give any answer to the question regarding gender. Among respondents 42 % of them live in the city, 48 % live in the country, and 10 % did not give any answer to the question regarding their place of living. The data has been collected by means of a questionnaire that has been created on the basis of literature analysis regarding the subject of successful ageing (Kozerska, 2015). The questionnaire consisted of 49 statements featuring an elderly person. There has been attached a seven point scale to each of the statements. Using that scale the students were supposed to

specify as to what extent the given statements feature a successfully ageing person.

2. Data analysis

Collected data was analysed by means of a statistical method – hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward's method; Pearson correlation as a distance). That kind of analysis enables to recognize the structure of relations among the features of an elderly person.
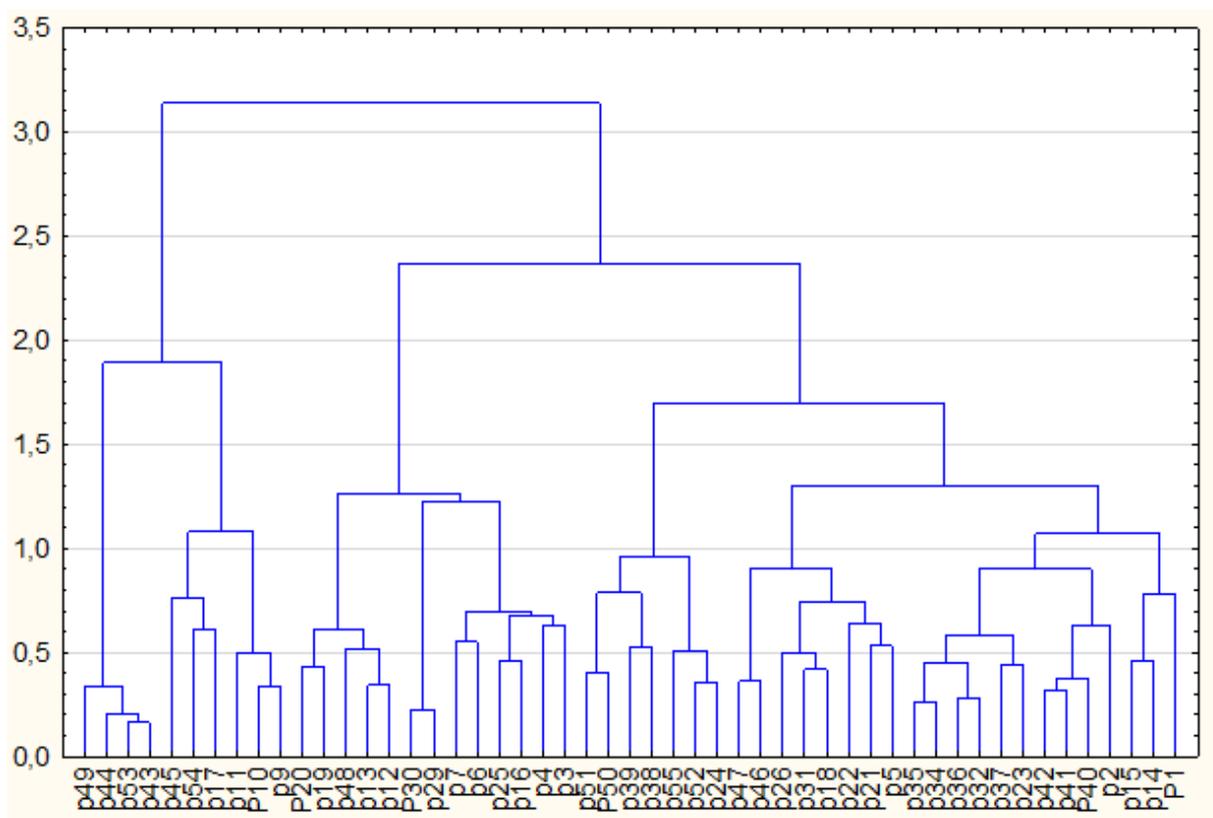
Research results

Figure 1 **The structure of relations among the items of questionnaire**

Legend:

	Items of questionnaire
Cluster 1	p49. a person feels the love of Supreme Being (God)
	p44. a person has the sense of communication with God
	p53. a person knows that he/she has lived in harmony with religious rules so far
	p43. a person has the feeling that he/ she lives in harmony with religious rules
	p45. material things are of no importance to an individual
	p54. a person does not expect anything from others
	p17. a person is perceived as a very young one by everybody
	p11. a person gets support from own grandchildren

	p10. a person takes care of grandchildren
	p9. being around grandchildren is enjoyable to an individual
Cluster 2	p20. a person has a loving family
	p19. a person has a loving spouse
	p48. a person receives love from other people
	p13. a person is satisfied from own life so far
	p12. a person makes own dreams come true
	p30. a person has no financial problems
	p 29. a person is in a good material situation
	p6. a person has no health problems
	p7. a person is appreciated in the community in which he/she lives in
	p25. a person is in a good physical and mental condition
	p16. one is an active person
	p4. one has a lot of friends
	p3. a person is an active member of a community in which he/she lives in
Cluster 3	p51. despite health problems he/she is a cheerful person
	p50. a person knows that he/she has done much good for others
	p39. he/ she is a self-reliant person who does not need support from others
	p38. he/she accepts oneself as an ageing person
	p55. a person is able to cope with health problems
	p52. one is a self-reliant person who does not count on others' support
	p24. a person is independent from others
	p47. a person gives love to other people
	p46. a person is able to enjoy every life moment
	p26. a person has good relations with others
	p31. a person has own interests and dedicates time to passions
	p18. a person has a circle of friends to pleasantly spend time with
	p 22. a person has interests and dedicates own time to them
	p21. a person can do what he/ she feels like doing at the moment
	p5. a person has one or more friends
	p35. a person enjoys life satisfaction
	p34. a person is aware that he/she has fulfilled own life purposes so far
	p36. a person has targets and dreams for the future
	p32. a person positively values most of own achievements
	p37. a person is in harmony with own body
	p23. a person is an authority for somebody
	p42. a person has a feeling of living in harmony with own nature
	p41. a person is satisfied with own achievements
	p40. a person has a feeling of living in harmony with oneself and surroundings
	p2. a person gives support to others
	p15. there is something important that the person will leave behind to the next generations
	p14. a person has skills that can be handed over to others
	p1. a person has much to be handed over to younger people

Figure 1 presents three big clusters of variables. The items of a questionnaire regarding **Cluster1** form two groups. The first group (cluster 1a) - these are statements which focus on the topic of religiousness and spirituality. There are, for example statements describing a person who *Has the feeling of communication with God*, *Feels the love of Supreme Being*. This group of variables is linked to the items of a questionnaire (cluster 1b) emphasizing lack of expectations regarding support from other people or lack of paying attention to material things. Moreover, cluster 1b consists of a group of variables describing close relations with grandchildren: *A person takes care of grandchildren*, *A person receives support from grandchildren*, *Being around grandchildren gives pleasure to an individual*. Cluster 1 is quite distant from the other groups of variables, meaning that statements included in that cluster are treated by respondents as a separate subject of assessment.

Arithmetic mean of assessments made by respondents with a reference to all statements in this cluster is M=4.98, standard deviation s=0.9.

Cluster 2 consists of two groups of variables. The first group (cluster 2a) – these are statements describing an elderly person as the one having a loving family and being loved by other people. In this group there is a statement in the questionnaire describing an elderly person as the one who is satisfied with life and has fulfilled own dreams. It can be assumed that realising own dreams and having a loving family by respondents is to a great extent associated with satisfaction from one's own life.

Cluster 2b consists of a group of statements describing an elderly person as an active one, being in a good physical and mental condition, involved in a community life in which that person lives. This group shows a big similarity to the questionnaire statements (and is in a close distance to) regarding a material situation of an elderly person. These are the following statements: *A person has no material problems* and *A person is in a good material situation*.

Arithmetic mean of assessments made by respondents with a reference to all statements in this cluster is M=5.56, standard deviation s=0.7.

Cluster 3 consists of three big groups of statements. The first one (cluster 3a) describes an elderly person as an independent and self-reliant one, able to cope with health problems. These are, for example statements like: *A person is independent, does not seek any support from others; A person is independent from other people; Despite health problems he/she is a cheerful person; A person is self-reliant and does not need help from others*. Let us pay attention to the fact that this group of variables includes a statement *Accepting oneself as an ageing person*. Placing this variable in the group consisting of statements regarding the subject of independence may suggest that acceptance of changes related to ageing is associated by students with a sense of being in control of

one's own life, which in turn can be linked to a feeling of being independent from others.

Cluster 3b describes an elderly person as the one fulfilling own dreams, dedicating time to an activity corresponding to one's own interests. Statements included in that group refer to a possibility of doing what a person feels like doing at the moment; having a circle of friends to pleasantly spend the time with; an ability to enjoy every life moment.

Cluster 3c – these are statements describing a person having a sense of life fulfillment. These are, for example statements such as: *A person is aware that life targets have been realized; A person positively values most of life achievements; A person has the feeling of life fulfillment; A person is in harmony with own body*. These statements include, among others, a group of questionnaire items referring to handing over certain values to the next generations (e.g. *There is something important that this person will leave behind to the next generations; One has skills that can be handed over to others*) and a sentence: *A person is an authority to somebody*. Being an authority is associated by students with a person who accepts oneself and own current achievements, *A person lives in harmony with oneself and surroundings, A person lives in harmony with own nature*.

Arithmetic mean of assessments made by respondents with a reference to all statements in this cluster is M=5.69, standard deviation s=0.8.

Discussion

The cluster analysis, conducted on the basis of the questionnaire, has identified three groups of variables describing three different ways of understanding successful ageing by young adults.

1. The first way, which has been distinguished based on the literature review, coincides with the way of understanding successful ageing seen as outreaching "real self", transcendence. The object of transcendence can be the person themselves (e.g. self-realisation) and transcendence that goes beyond the self (Heszen-Niejodek & Gruszczyńska, 2004). Transcendence within the person is defined in terms of self-realisation meeting transcendent needs, self-improvement accepting moral values and experiencing creative art processes. Transcendence beyond the self (outside) focuses on the Supreme Being, the Universe or another person whose wellbeing is more important to an individual than their own personal wellbeing. The definition of successful ageing, based on the first group of variables, regards the outside transcendence concentrating on the Supreme Being (God). Furthermore, the configuration of variables shows some similarities, concerning changes in terms of the development towards gerotranscendence in the elderly. Tornstam (2005) provides the following

examples: an increased feeling of communication with God and the universe; a decreased interest in material things; an increased feeling of closeness with the coming generation; a decreased need to be the centre of attention; dedicating more time to meditation. All these examples can be found in the first group of variables identified on the basis of the analysis. According to the definition of successful ageing based on the answers given by young adults, opening up to spiritual reality is associated with positive relationships with grandchildren. Successful ageing perceived as transcendence is related to the intergenerational transmission of values, including spirituality and religiousness. The result is coincides with the Polish research results concerning relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren. In addition, the role of grandparents in grandchildren's religious and spiritual development is highlighted. According to CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre), the research conducted on a representative sample of 1058 adult Poles randomly selected revealed that three-quarters of Poles (72 %) are grateful to their grandparents; 65 % of respondents believe that their grandparents played a significant role in their upbringing, whereas every second person (54 %) admits that their grandparents passed on religious beliefs to them (Kowalczuk, 2012).

Analysing variables in the figure 1, it can be noticed that a group of statements included in cluster 1 is in a big distance from the other two clusters. Successful ageing understood in terms of going beyond the 'real self' is for respondents a separate way of comprehending successful ageing. Arithmetical mean of assessments of respondents regarding statements included in that cluster is lower than the arithmetical mean of assessments for the other two clusters. Going beyond the real self is to a lesser extent associated with good ageing. Definitions of successful ageing created on the basis of analysis of the next clusters are closer to young people.

2. The second way of understanding successful ageing consists of a set of features similar to the criteria formulated in the model by Rowe and Kahn (1998). The elements of cluster of the second one are features such as: activity, good physical and mental condition, good health condition, social activity, having a lot of friends. There is also an element such as fulfillment of one's dreams, as well as material situation, or lack of financial problems. Young adult people, who associate an image of a person meeting the requirements described by Rowe and Kahn in their model with an image of a happy person, add also some extra features related to having a loving family and receiving love from others. In the definition of successful ageing which emerges from the second group of variables, an elderly person has habits, preferences, lifestyle and activity as a young one. Activity is associated with a good physical and mental condition as well as participation in the community (these variables show a high level of likeliness in the figure 1). Young adult people notice a relation between

elements that are included in the biomedical model by Rowe and Kahn, and their material situation. This relation if often emphasized by authors of scientific articles. On the basis of research findings exposing a relation between elements of a model and material situation, critics of a biomedical model in literature emphasize an exclusionary and discriminating character of the conception. They observe that the chances of meeting the criteria formulated in the model are not even – they depend on variables correlated with a financial situation such as the social class, gender, race or education (e.g. Dillaway & Byrnes 2009, Scheidt et al., 1999).

The second way of understanding successful ageing to a greater extent is identified with an image of a happy elderly person by young adults rather than the way discussed as the first one. This may result from the fact that this image is closer to respondents taking part in the research, just because it is similar to an image of a young person who can be thought of as a happy one. From the other point of view, the biomedical model of successful ageing is being popularized in mass media; it is present in the social politics, it is also at the core of an activity of various senior organizations and Third Age Universities (Katz, 2000). Wide-ranging promotion of lifestyle based on activity and productiveness surely influences the way of perceiving ageing by young people.

3. The third way of understanding successful ageing is made of three elements. The first one can be called *life for the moment*. It means that an individual dedicates time to own interests, passions, and does what a person feels like doing at the moment. It is related to life satisfaction, awareness that own life purposes have been realized. The second element associated by respondents with *life for the moment* is linked to generativity. The description of an elderly person formed as a result of analysis of that cluster of variables refers to the following features: giving support to others, awareness that there is something one can leave to the next generations, having skills that can be shared with younger people. Kotre (1984, p. 10) defines generativity as 'a desire to invest one's substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self'. Generative behaviours can have their source in two kinds of desires (McAdams & de St. Aubin 1992): a symbolical desire for immortality and a desire to be needed by other people. The first one leads to leaving behind a lasting heritage, the second one leads to behaviours such as taking care of others, nursing them and bringing them up. Taking into consideration a configuration of variables in the figure 1., cluster 3 presents the first type of generativity (*There is something important a person will leave behind to the next generations, There is much to be handed over to younger people, One has the skills that can be handed over to others*). This kind of generativity is associated by respondents with independence, self-reliance of an elderly person, awareness of realizing one's own life targets and the sense of life fulfillment. This way of understanding

successful ageing is the closest to the type distinguished on the basis of literature and described as transcending one's own 'real self', and conveying that transcendence takes place within a person and means self-realisation. This type of understanding good ageing is to a quite similar scale recognizable by young adults as type 2. – average assessments of selected statements made by respondents on the given scale are comparable in those two cases.

Conclusion

1. On the basis of analysis there have been distinguished three ways of understanding successful ageing by young adults.
2. Data analysis collected in the group of young adults enables to distinguish two types of successful ageing understood as a link between transcendence and generativity: the first one refers to transcendence oriented at Supreme Being (God), which respondents associate with generativity having its source in a desire to be needed by others (grandchildren); the second type links transcendence *within a person* (self-realisation) to generativity having its source in a desire to leave behind some lasting heritage. The third type consists of elements of Rowe and Kahn model which are supplemented with good family relations. The second and the third way of understanding successful ageing to a greater extent is identified with an image of a happy elderly person by young adults rather than the way discussed as the first one.
3. In comparison with a typology created on the grounds of literature review there has been observed lack of a separate type that could be defined as *being a part of community*. Variables which refer to that field have been found in each of the differentiated clusters, however: in cluster 1 – variables regarding relationship with grandchildren, in cluster 2 – relationship with a family, in cluster 3 – relations with people whom an individual is an authority for.

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