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Who is our Advisor?

Anna Gutowska - Doctor of Human Sciences, special education teacher, andragogue, gerontologist, educator, trainer.

Assistant Professor at the Department of Andragogy and Social Gerontology, Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Łódź.

Author of publications in the field of andragogy, including special andragogy, social gerontology, geragogy, including special geragogy, among others. in the area of non-formal education, special didactics, inclusive education, mental and intellectual disabilities of adults, including the elderly.

Participant of over 100 scientific conferences, including international ones. Has extensive experience in scientific work, as well as practical experience with the elderly and people with disabilities (including many years of work with people with mental disorders).

Trainer, workshop facilitator, among others, in the field of issues related to old age, disability, mental disorders, adult learning, mental health hygiene, and soft skills.

Manager and implementer of several educational and scientific projects.

How can older people find or rediscover their purpose through active citizenship?

There are probably many ways for older people to find or rediscover their purpose through active citizenship. For example, they can share their unique experiences by getting involved in social activities — as mentors, volunteers, advisors in senior councils or local organizations.

They can also, like any adult citizen, start some social activity without aiming to share anything, but doing something for themselves, for the sake of activity itself, for example.

They can also engage in activities that could be described as ideological, for which they previously had no time, e.g. supporting environmental protection, human rights, or anti-discrimination activities (activities for social change).

Active citizenship can also manifest itself in educational activities and personal development, discovering and taking on new social roles.

How can we create opportunities that allow older people to contribute to society in a way that aligns with what they love, what they are good at, and what the community needs?

Specific ways that come to my mind:

- recognizing individual potential (talents, passions, interests, predispositions, etc.),

- mapping social potential,

- flexible approach to current social roles.

Locality is also important, i.e., creating activity centres (not necessarily dedicated exclusively to seniors) close to the place of residence (physical variant) and online platforms (easy to use) (digital variant).

Joint action projects can also be effective, e.g., community gardens, intergenerational podcasts, etc.). Such activities should be visible and appreciated.

The point is not to "encourage activity for the sake of activity," but to build bridges between what older people love and can do, and what the local community really needs.

How can the concept of IKIGAI be integrated into with community or civic programs to support older adults?

For example, through individual IKIGAI discovery paths, or arranging and choosing roles by seniors that align with their passion ("personalized" roles). Implementing their own individual mini-projects will also work well. "Social IKIGAI" platforms can also be created, based on common ideas, interests, and passions.

What do you think about the current European Union policy towards the elderly community?

In Poland, there are various initiatives that can serve to some extent as inspiring models for other European countries in supporting active citizenship of older people.

Those I have heard about include, for example, the "Active+" Program (a government program aimed at increasing the participation of older people in all areas of social life).

The main goals of this project concern the social activity of seniors, civic participation, digital inclusion, and promoting healthy and active aging.

There are also projects in which initiatives are taken to create support and activity centers for seniors (day care centres, senior clubs, etc.), offering a variety of educational, cultural, and recreational activities tailored to the needs of older people.

The initiative of the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology, LivingLab PJAIT, which aims to involve seniors in the development of information and communication technologies, was interesting. This is an example of combining digital education with civic activity of older people. A lot of examples are to find nowadays.

Many older adults feel that they are underrepresented or that their opinions are not taken into account. How can we ensure that their voices and opinions are heard and matter?

The feeling of being overlooked and marginalized among older people often results not from a lack of willingness to participate, but from a lack of appropriate structures, invitation, and respect for their voice.

To change this, we need a systemic approach that combines respect, representation, and practical mechanisms of influence.

The voice of older people can be more audible and have a real impact if senior representation is included in the so-called decision-making bodies.

Social attitudes should change – ageism must be combated, and society, including local leaders and state officials, should be educated.

It is also worth strengthening the self-confidence and social skills of seniors. However, the most important thing seems to me to be strengthening the narrative in the media and culture (creating space in local media for the voices of seniors, social campaigns with the participation of older people, supporting projects that show the diversity and activity of seniors, not just their problems).

What are the main key points to consider when thinking about citizenship, not only for older adults but for lifelong aging?

It is worth considering active citizenship as a long-term process (civic education from an early age). It is important to build an "age-friendly society." When talking about citizenship, one must also think about the universal design of cities, institutions, and services, so that they are accessible, understandable, and friendly to various social groups (accessible tools, simple language, clear procedures, etc.).

It is also important to think about citizenship as a value associated with intergenerationality (activities for the common good, sharing responsibility for

change) and about treating the civic capital of seniors as an important resource.

It also seems to me that if all age groups are given a real influence on social policy, it will naturally not exclude seniors.

It is also necessary to stop thinking about older people only in terms of care and to appreciate their decision-making and autonomous capabilities.

One of the steps should be a change in the narrative and language in the context of old age and aging.

Many older people struggle with social and/or physical isolation. How can communities encourage older people to break out of their routine and become more actively involved in social life?

Older people can be encouraged to break out of isolation and actively participate in social life by, among other things, creating and opening local spaces for formal and informal meetings, flexible programs and projects tailored to the needs of seniors.

In my opinion, it is also important not to force seniors into activity, especially imposed activity, and not to treat them only as recipients, but also as creators.

It is also worth creating places where you can simply be together, without planned activating activities, and the activities do not always have to be of an entertainment nature.

The way of contacting seniors is also important, preferably with direct invitations and personal contact, and meetings and classes rather in small groups, where a friendly and predictable atmosphere is easier to achieve.

There is also a need for adaptation time and ensuring a sense of security.

People who need it should also be offered support – e.g. support groups for people in mourning, in illness, etc.

Overcoming isolation is not only about offering activities, but above all about building relationships, trust, and a sense of importance.

Presence is needed, not an offer. Care and interest, not just activation.

How important is accessibility?

Accessibility of public space for older people is not only an architectural issue, but also a social (mental) and digital one.

In a well-designed environment (according to the principles of universal design), seniors can function independently for longer, participate in social life, and feel dignified.

Therefore, it is necessary to eliminate architectural, communication, information, digital, and mental barriers. Appropriate adapted infrastructure, accessible transport, clear and friendly navigation (including appropriate signage), simple and understandable language, and accessible documents are some of the elements enabling social participation.

Moreover, older people should have a say in what their space looks like, which not only provides better solutions but also a sense of agency.

Mapping barriers together with residents of specific spaces is useful. Accessibility is the foundation of dignified aging.

It's not about "amenities," but about the right to participate in social life. Good design is one that is good for everyone – and therefore also for seniors.

What solutions and processes should be considered when thinking about improving (or an alternative to) public transport for older people?

Seniors do not only need "separate" transport – they need inclusive solutions that combine convenience, safety and simplicity with a sense of independence and dignity.

However, looking at the current situation, improving public transport (or its alternatives) for older people is a key element of independence, activity, and quality of life in old age.

Older people often stop using transport when it becomes too complicated, inconvenient, or stressful for them.

Low-floor trams and buses, clear markings, accessible stops with shelters, seating, and good lighting are necessary.

There is also a need for easy travel planning and "on-demand" transport. Alternatives may include forms such as transport volunteering or so-called "neighbourly mobility".

Thank you so much for the interesting content and time given.