Conclusion

Ageing, COVID-19 and 'new normality'

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The outbreak of the global COVID-19 epidemic was one of the most shocking events of recent decades. The global scope of this event provoked social reaction stronger than information about the ongoing regional armed conflicts or other social problems such as famines, disease, human trafficking, the migrant crisis, civil revolutions, economic crises and terrorist attacks, which are affecting various countries and continents.

The COVID-19 epidemic has shown the pluralism of human anxiety as it has impacted everyone regardless of race, gender, religion or age. It has equalized economies, political systems and public health care systems. It could be said that it has spread no matter what mitigation efforts were conducted. Older persons were especially affected by the first wave. It revealed that the multimorbidity of this age group exposes them to disease and severe illness in much larger extents. The scale of susceptibility of contracting COVID-19 and the risk of death in people aged over 65 compared to other age groups was disproportionately high, as repeatedly demonstrated in the chapters of this book. The COVID-19 epidemic has shown that the older population is particularly vulnerable to the effects of the global epidemic, not only in terms of health (the scope and scale of the consequences constitute a constantly updated area of research), but also in social, economic, legal, psychological and other dimensions. Older persons have felt the impact of the epidemic in terms of difficulties accessing goods and services resulting from the lockdowns, experience of loneliness and isolation from loved ones, particularly younger generations, due to fear and uncertainty regarding the development of events, and changes in routine daily activities caused by the ban on meeting other people through religious, social, recreational, tourist and sport-related activities). At the same time, volunteer grassroots social support systems have emerged to assist older persons by going shopping, walking dogs and handling official matters. Public mechanisms were also created to enable safer participation in social life (e.g. special shopping hours for older persons, doctor consultations over the phone, online support services, including quick training for using new forms of technology).

In this publication, which was planned and written during the early stages of the global epidemic situation, the authors attempted to conduct in-depth

analyses of the impact of COVID-19 on the older population and their social environment in specific country locations. Reflections included in this publication should primarily serve as general indications and an ongoing study of this topic. It could not be otherwise in a situation where the scale, range, scope and strength of the virus's impact are only becoming more evident through the unfolding of months. Therefore, the authors of this book have attempted to predict further the future impacts of the COVID-19 virus in the lives of older persons. Their statements outline fields for further research and make recommendations in terms of specific analyses in a preliminary and inspiring way. Some texts have been verified in relation to the results of research conducted after several months. However, this does not change the innovative and pioneering character of this publication. At the same time, one should note the selective nature of the subject area, which resulted from encountering the unknown and thus taking note of socially 'significant' issues. The time to analyse the more subtle, less obvious and unnoticed trends by social researchers at first glance, hidden in the first months of the COVID-19 epidemic, will continue as the COVID-19 epidemic progresses.

There are several general conclusions regarding COVID-19s impact on older people that emerge from the considerations presented in this book. A researcher who wants to undertake a rigorous investigation of old age in a serious manner should take into account the following threads for reflection. These issues may be treated as an area of research in which it is possible to find more significant and less apparent factors impacting the situation of older persons, and include:

Loneliness and isolation

COVID-19 revealed large-scale feelings of loneliness and objective isolation triggered by the lockdown. On the one hand, in the case of the older population, these experiences could worsen pre-existing problems of marginalisation and self-marginalisation. On the other hand, this situation could result in searching for solutions and ways of accepting the imposed separation from other people. In order to counteract the consequences of older persons' isolation in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is first of all necessary to raise awareness of its impact on the mental health of both older persons themselves and the staff who are with them on a daily basis, as well as their families and relatives.

New technologies

In order to mitigate against social isolation, it is worth using new technologies that would enable older people to stay in touch with family and friends. Introducing activities based on new technologies may contribute to maintaining social ties of older persons, enabling social interactions and the use of services, e.g. medical. In addition, new technologies can serve as care

support – in other words, *prosthesis* for daily functioning – in situations of insufficient care resources.

Care

The pre-COVID reality in care services revealed many deficits in public welfare systems and the need to depending on informal caregivers, mostly family relatives. COVID-19 resulted in limited access even to this source of care due to fear of exposing older persons to infection, hospitalisation and death. To compensate for the deficits in care services, various initiatives for temporary support emerged – volunteers, neighbours, local support groups and scouts. However, COVID-19 unquestionably revealed how much is yet to be done, particularly in with low generational replacement rates.

Social policies for supporting older persons

State governments, municipal governments and other units responsible for public health and systems of social support and health care have been confronted with having insufficient fully operational resources to satisfy the social and health care needs of older persons. This situation is all the more worrying since forecasted demographic changes indicate that this situation will be conducive for ageing societies. In the case of future global cataclysms of the sort, we could find ourselves in a situation where the ‘law of the fittest’ (healthier, younger, wealthier, etc.) dominates, which will, without creating the appropriate strategies and action plans, set out the direction of society’s way of coping with uncertainty.

Counteracting age discrimination and stereotypes

COVID-19 has revealed that current stereotypes are accurate and that there are great resources available for the emergence and creation of positive stereotypes, that in themselves, as is the case with any stereotype, are nothing good, but can contribute to social reinforcement of desired behaviour.

Functioning for support residential care institutions for older persons

Institutions acting for the benefit of older persons have undergone a great test. This concerned the functioning of residential care facilities in protecting the older adults living in them and caring for the safety of employees. The epidemic situation has also verified the motivation of representatives of social assistance professions to undertake specific activities such as helping older people. Depending on the actions taken, positive and negative coping strategies that meet these needs can be found. When looking through the prism of coping with COVID-19 in the area of institutional care, it is

necessary to observe the quality and the working method of representatives of medical and social assistance professions, consider ways of supporting workers in their professional development and listen to the needs of this professional group in the context of similar intense situation anticipated in the future. These analyses also demonstrate the role and significance of the “great absence” of the family members of older people staying in 24-hour care institutions (hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, other care facilities or prisons) as a result of the epidemic situation, particularly at the moments of their suffering or death.

Religiosity and spirituality

The absence of significant people in older persons’ lives has drawn more attention to issues related to an area that appears to be existentially important for older persons, namely spirituality and religiosity. Separation from loved ones and restrictions in religious services could have influenced the spiritual experience of their existential situation.

All of the above-mentioned areas lead to one more conclusion resulting from this publication. It is imperative to explore the reality of older adults presented in research based on direct contact with them. In the pandemic era, establishing such contact has been difficult, which could have adversely affected research findings and indeed constitutes a premise for conducting studies. This leads to several important conclusions forced by the need for methodological modifications to the research process:

- It is crucial to search for a platform of direct research contact with older persons.
- It is essential to consider the extent of cognitive bias resulting from increased anxiety, reluctance, helplessness and uncertainty experienced by older persons in the role of respondents.
- It is important to build bidirectional trust, which means enhancing trust by offering older persons ownership of research. Instead of framing elders as passive subjects for research, we advocate a co-creation methodology. While acknowledging both traditional models – the medical and social dimensions of ageing – we embrace the ‘Cultural model of ageing’ as a means of capturing how older people tackle their own ageing issues (Łuszczynska 2020).
- It is essential to remember the ethical context of carrying out research with older persons, particularly in the epidemic situation, which could lead to abuse, crossing borders and pushing the ethical aspect of research into the background. It is all the more important to consult neutral bodies such as ethical committees at universities with regards to the research assumptions, course and analyses for in-depth inspection.
- The final and most important remark is about enhancing the role of older adults as active participants in the research process, which is

essential for the future development of more participatory methods for our common issue: ageing. We must expand roles for those who are the co-creators of our super-ageing society, in which public and statutory authorities must work with older people in planning future services in order to ensure that our communities will be fit for all ages.

COVID-19 brought an end to the world as we know it and affected everyone, irrespective of one's position in the life course. After several months of living under the pressure of the virus and pandemic situation, we are starting to wonder when and how we will return to life before the epidemic outbreak. It is becoming more and more apparent that the COVID-19 virus has irreversibly changed the world to such an extent that people will not be able to return to their original conditions. Questions also arise concerning the 'new normality': What does this entail? How will it be characterized? How are we going to experience it? What solutions that have proved effective will we use? At this point, there are more questions than answers. The basic feature of this "new normality" is its dominant uncertainty, which paradoxically may be the only constant factor in re-creating personal and social reality. It is possible that new optional solutions will be built around this uncertainty, which will be evaluated based on the ability to foresee various scenarios of events.

The experience of the first months of COVID-19 has shown that older people's situation – especially their relatively high exposition to a greater risk of illness and death – has nevertheless pointed out the social resources of older persons and their environment. Older persons have been cut off from contact with the world during the lockdown situation to a lesser extent than expected. Older persons have demonstrated that they can use new technologies quite efficiently to remain in contact with their loved ones and participate in educational or social meetings. The threat to the life and health of older persons has confirmed the value of the representatives of younger generations' relationship with older persons. Grassroots initiatives organized by scouts, volunteers, local action groups and neighbors to support older persons facing difficulties with everyday functioning have emerged. Moreover, family relationships, which have been subject to a significant loosening of intergenerational bonds, have indicated fundamental reference points. It seems that the dynamic situation of older persons has had an impact on perceiving the necessity of supporting them as a social group by central and local authorities by creating and implementing age-focused solutions and strategies. Systemic solutions associated with health care, social assistance, support programs and local government initiatives have indicated just how supportive society as a whole should be for the weakest citizens who deserve assistance in the name of humanistic values and not economic interests.

The reflections presented in this publication were aimed at inspiring researchers of the global phenomenon of ageing societies to explore issues related to COVID-19, an unexpected factor impacting the fate of older persons around the world. The presented analyses may serve comparative purposes

and also as a seed of in-depth research leads. However, not everything that is associated with COVID-19 and the ageing of the global population occurs immediately.

In conclusion, we hope that this book has provided its readers with genuine inspiration to undertake new research challenges related to the phenomenon of the world's ageing population. We believe that the contents of various parts of this publication have been a source of new ideas, reflections and a guide in bringing to light hidden dependencies and phenomena resulting from COVID-19 to improve the impact on older persons' increasingly efficient social functioning. Increasingly efficient exploration of the needs and challenges associated with ageing societies is not only our passion but also our future. Alongside our colleagues – from various countries and cultures – we desire to explore these needs not only as academics but primarily as people whose expected existential experience will grow old and function efficiently in later life.

Reference

- Łuszczzyńska M. (2020). *Researching ageing: Methodological challenges and their empirical background*. London: Routledge.