

THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE ELDERLY THROUGH AN EXAMPLE OF GRAND MASTERS

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ABSTRACT

This article presents characteristics of the selected aspects of the creative potential in older persons. In addition to specific aptitudes or gifts, cognitive qualities such as intelligence, knowledge and experience have been indicated as the components of creative potential. Furthermore, the importance of a developed lifestyle at earlier stages of life has been highlighted, along with the attitude towards one's ageing, spiritual sensibility and motivation for creative work. An attempt has been made to illustrate distinguishing characteristics of works by outstanding creators in the latter parts of their lives. More often than not, critics cited the following characteristics of creative persons: individualism, inclination towards harkening back to the past, melancholic spirits and thought orientation regarding transcendent reality.

Key words: elderly, creative activity, openness to Transcendence, melancholy

INTRODUCTION

Creativity - realized both in the egalitarian sense by an ordinary, average man and in the elitist meaning as the so-called "high creation" characterized by remarkably gifted people - is strictly related to personal development. On the one hand, creative activity is a derivative and a sign of the growth process effectuated throughout life, on the other hand, it has impact on a person's development, dynamizes it and gives it direction. It also has a crucial, manifold correlation with the quality of life of a creatively-disposed person. As a rule, creativity encourages a high sense of life quality. Oftentimes, though, it is motivated by its low standard of living and a wish to divert attention from acutely felt deficiencies. One can also look at creative activity from a personalistic perspective noticing its display of subjectivity of a human being, his intentionality, fulfilling the natural need for transgression, self-efficacy, the symbolic 'going beyond' the *status quo*, self-determination and self-realization. As argued by many researchers who represent life-span development psychology, a human being can evolve and stay creative throughout their whole life even during

twilight years. It is the inborn creative potential that allows this to happen, the tapping into which, however rests notably on personal will-power, auto-determination as well as life circumstances to some extent, especially the manner of living through important experiences and attaching personal meanings to them. Although every person has their specific, individual development resources, not everyone draws from them in equal measure. Psychological researches show that only a scant number of the elderly achieve their full growth potential. This regularity also applies to younger people, it is no wonder then that among the old ones there are only few for whom a creative way of living and one related to that self-realization does not serve as the most important incentive for activity. However, there are older people who live creatively and evolve almost until the end of their days, enjoying and feeling the sense of life.

NON-SPECIFIC APTITUDES FOR CREATIVITY IN THE ELDERLY

Except for the specific factors that make up the creative potential of a human being, such as innate capabilities, gifts or predispositions it is also important to mark out the non-specific factors, which are equally important and downright essential in order for a person to live a creative lifestyle. These include mental, emotional-motivational and personal dispositions. From among the mental factors, the ones which deserve special mention are the following: intellectual performance, cognitive curiosity, knowledge and various skills acquired in the course of school education as well as through one's own learning. Fluid intelligence and cognitive functions such as cognitive flexibility, working memory or planning are of significant importance in the context of creativity. These functions are part of the so-called cognitive reserve which provides crucial assets for seniors in their later stages of life. Whereas, the enablers of the cognitive reserve consist of some personal characteristics and socio-economic status (education and type of professional work) as well as the individual way of leisure time management (Byczewska-Konieczny, 2015). The research of the above quoted author (and other scholars, too) goes to prove that higher education along with personal characteristics such as extraversion and openness to experience aid cognitive performance and make for effective functioning. However, what is interesting and arousing conflicting feelings at the same time is that long, above-average time spent at professional work and many social contacts do not have positive impact on cognitive reserve, they even show negative effects for cognitive condition. The functions of fluid intelligence responsible for learning ability and information processing, focus of attention, working memory, new knowledge and skills acquisition decrease with age. At the same time, though there arises the level of crystallized intelligence founded upon previously acquired knowledge and experience. Crystallized intelligence engages the post-formal-relativist, contextual and dialectical thinking. These processes reveal themselves at their most intense in the middle

part of life. Generally, these processes remain effective even at later stages of life provided that we are dealing with the usual ageing, free of pathology. If an elderly person stays active and gets involved in the mentioned processes in day-to-day functioning, they can cope well especially with various psychological problems. Contextual thinking allows for the perception of events in the wide-ranging background of meaning, in the far-reaching perspective that goes beyond the horizon of material reality. Owing to this, judgments of the development-oriented older people are usually toned-down, balanced and their decisions prudent. Thinking relativism in turn makes it easier to look at matters from different perspectives, which in effect results in more tolerance, human understanding toward those with opposite opinions³. Eventually, dialectical processes make it possible to recognize paradoxical events, reconciling logically-conflicting judgments, coping with contradictions, finding meaning in that which is meaningless as compared to formal-logical rationality. "More haste less speed", "The very thing that stands in your way allows you to move on" "The great little man", "Life after life" - these are the examples of phrases the understanding of which poses no difficulty for the elderly who naturally employ paradoxical-dialectical thinking. The increased decline in fluid intelligence, which takes place from an early adulthood, together with the progress of the crystallized intelligence occurring simultaneously, manifests itself in an exemplary way, among others, in scientific production. There is a conviction amongst the representatives of the sciences that the largest number of the most important accomplishments that require both formal and logical thinking have been observed in younger researchers (up to approx. 40 years of age). It is quite contrary to the humanities, where the most significant works were created by older scholars who had greater life-experience and broader view of the world. Such persons are more prone to profound reflection rather than to calculation. Relatively high, long-term level of fluid intelligence performance, of course, may additionally foster tapping into the cognitive reserve, the previously acquired knowledge and exercising the resultant problem-solving skills. In addition to intellectual and performance factors, there are others, crucial, yet non-specific ones concerning creative activity also pertaining to the elderly such as motivation, willingness to act and initiative. Without auto-determination even a huge potential be it for the intellect or art does not sustain creative activity or personal development.

While in childhood and in youth a person considerably develops in a somewhat spontaneous fashion, absorbing the incoming information, being subjected to social mechanisms of learning, in adulthood - due to adaptive reasons - one does not have to get intentionally involved in one's development anymore. Thus, motivation, personal will, and desire to implement one's possibilities or

3 Sometimes, unfortunately, thinking contextualism and relativism can give rise to negative consequences. The difficulty in making a decision, wavering between two opposite points of view, being in a state of "barren balance" as termed by C.G. Jung, are the very examples of these problems.

capabilities prove to be especially indispensable. Therefore, statistically considered, in the second half of life, the self-realization process is particularly visible. Much research data and observations of life convince us that the willingness to act and self-discipline constitute an even more vital factor in terms of personal and social success than the congenital abilities do alone. Consequently, one can have a great creative potential and nothing to show for it. And vice versa, oftentimes averagely gifted learners achieve high status in their chosen walk of life in adulthood through their systematic effort and assiduous work.

For a creative activity of seniors lifestyle, related to their attitude towards old age, plays a significant role. In senior years we usually deal with the continuation of the lifestyle developed during earlier stages of life. However, there are also exceptions to this rule. Out of the most frequently occurring approaches spotted by researchers such as: constructive, defensive, hostile ones – towards the world and themselves (see: Steuden, 2011), the constructive approach has been found as the most beneficial factor to further development and the creative activity. It is manifested by seniors who accept their last stage of life, positively value their past and look to their future optimistically. Moreover, constructive approach is also linked to the satisfying social interaction. Paradoxically, defensive attitude encourages any activity even creativity. It is clearly visible, especially in persons who have been accustomed to intensive, systematic action for whom such *modus operandi* comprises their meaning of life and has been crucial to personal style of everyday functioning. Those who show the defensive approach have been observed to be plagued by fear of ageing, the loss of mental and physical health, status, and by fear of the end of life. In such cases, activity serves as a buffer against negative feelings, the experience of the existential drama of passing. Also, it helps to divert attention from upsetting thoughts, which, in case of gifted people are often translated into artistic work. Spiritual sensibility is hard to overestimate in particular in terms of creative activity of the elderly, their openness to transcendent and metaphysical values as well as searching for the answers to the unfolding existential questions about the meaning of life faced in the perspective of passing, suffering and finiteness. These themes are usually related to the temporal reorientation consisting in higher than ever thought-direction towards the past with the increasing need for reorganization of memories, balancing the life outcome, the reinterpretation and giving meaning to the earlier life experiences in the light of the newly discovered values. Spiritual sensibility also consists of aesthetic sensitivity, the need for contact with nature, music and works of art. Aesthetic experiences liven up seniors' memories, evoke associations, make older people reflect on life and they give them motivation to undertake creation. The specific paradox we are dealing with, in relation to seniors, is that on the one hand senses become weaker (e.g. eyesight or hearing), on the other hand, sensitivity to beauty, the harmony of colours, shapes or sounds tend to increase with age. Sometimes the elderly notice and appreciate more aesthetic peculiarities than younger people do. The increase in aesthetic sensitivity of

seniors can be best seen in their characteristic interest taken in the views they have always been familiar with yet have not appreciated beforehand, e.g. the view of trees growing next to the often traversed road, a historic building or sunset.

THE PERSONAL FEATURES OF CREATORS MANIFESTED IN THEIR WORKS CREATED IN THE AUTUMN YEARS

The factors set out in the article which encourage the creative activity of seniors can be found in biographies and works of outstanding creators. The book by Mieczysław Wallis entitled: *The latter creation of grand masters* (1975) provides circumstantial evidence confirming the above - mentioned thesis. The author adduces numerous examples of creative people, who lived very active lives - almost until the very end - creating works that delight recipients worldwide. From among masters who present different fields of art there are, inter alia, Michelangelo, Titian, El Greco, Rembrandt, Mozart, Goethe, Thomas Mann, Beethoven, Leopold Staff and many others. The analysis of works created in the autumn years shows their considerable individualism concerning the form, the excellent fluency of the artistic means of expression by their creators, who defy any rules or standards. Just as the plenteous lexis (e.g. in the late works by Goethe, Leopold Staff or Thomas Mann) astounds readers, so too do the immense means of expression (e.g. in pieces by Beethoven) surprise his listeners. In juxtaposing the characteristics of the works by "the great artists" with the previously quoted comments on the elders' personal dispositions, one can see various convergences. Thus, the very mentioned presence of the paradoxical and dialectical processes characteristic of thinking in the elderly may be illustrated with the following words from the poem by Leopold Staff under the title *The blooming branch* (Wallis, 1975, p. 132)⁴:

I have lived and out of things of man I am familiar with everything
Wherefore my thoughts which counsel me
Are sad yet sunny just like the old in orchard
And I learn (...) to see wistful sweetness in tears, kindness in sin.

By contrast, the appreciation of beauty and rapture over it can be found in his other later poems, for instance in the poetic work, entitled: *The smile of hours* (Wallis, 1975, p. 132):

If a man comes from nothingness, is it not enough for him to be given
at least for a fleeting moment the beauty, awe and rapture reigning over it?

4 There are literary narrations of the characters and at the same time prime examples which point out to the presence of all kinds of post formal thinking in the mind of a developing person provided among others in the novel by Stefan Chwin entitled *The Golden Pelican* (2000); see: Straś-Romanowska, (2005). Also, the novel by Wiesław Myśliwski entitled *The Last Deal* (2012) may serve as an example of tendency to increased downright turbulent reflection, and the broad, multifaceted and deepened thinking which is characteristic of the elderly.

Nota bene Staff may serve as an example of a man who evolved throughout his life, making good use of his creative potential. The expression of this creative attitude is best seen in his ever-changing poetry both in content and form. M. Wallis characterizes L. Staff's poetic path in the following words: "...It led us (the path - remainder MSR) from the pessimistic fin de siècle moods of sorrow, melancholy and lassitude through the pagan-bacchanalian "life-intoxication" vagabonding and artistic bohemian unconcern to the joyful franciscan affirmation of life; from the lyrics of dream to the poetry of commonness; from the captivation by the beauty of the polish landscape at a different time of day or year and the adoration of the quiet polish country with all your heart, from the delight with the appeal of the Mediterranean landscape and ancient sculpture, from the understanding of the world as order and harmony through the deep religious tones of the *Eye of a needle* to the radical transformation caused by the shock of the World War 2. Eventually, this path leads the poet to facing his life outcome - to fulfilling an important, peculiar need of the elderly that the poet expressed in the collection under the title *The Nine Muses* (Wallis, 1975, p. 142).

As the last living member of my generation,
 dear friends I buried,
 I have seen life change
 And so have I changed like life itself
 I have loved people and nature,
 Into the future I have looked optimistically
 I have worshiped freedom and unconstraint,
 Fraternalized with the wind and a cloud
 I was neither attracted to the bronze monument,
 nor resounding horns nor thunderous applause,
 I shall only leave an empty room and a reticent, quiet fame.

Staff's poetry is also an example of an open-mindedness and a deepening reflectiveness of an ageing creator as well as an increased spiritual sensibility that comes with age. He could draw from many sources of knowledge - the ancient, medieval, modern, from the Bible and younger creators.

Another characteristic feature of the creative disposition in the elderly is their keen awareness of tasks and goals to accomplish along with their implementation. On the one hand, elderly people experience many constraints in terms of possibility of action. On the other hand, they feel desire to go outside the former limits. This results in the creation of challenging works in that the creators no longer respect the traditional conventions and - sometimes even their own rules that they employed in their former artistic work that their audience used to be familiar with. As an example, Wallis cites the case of the latter creation of Michelangelo, who transgressed any traditional rules concerning the art of painting in his *Last Judgment*. Likewise, Goethe did not reckon with any respects be it space or time in the second part of *Faust* (Wallis, 1975, p. 165). The impression of eccentricity or the extravagance the creators leave on their recipients is often interpreted by the critics as an indication of "aspi-

ration towards monumentalism" (Wallis, 1975, p. 166.). Psychologically, this fact can be considered as a sign of the wealth of experience and the thinking depth which are hard to contain inside the mind of the creator. Also, the inexpressibility of this plentitude often happens to be hardly comprehensible for existentially less-experienced people. On the other hand, the acquired mastery and the ever-present potential makes it possible for artists to reach their goals, the ones which occurred at the former stages of their life, yet for some reasons these ideas were not implemented at that time. For instance, Wallis gives the following examples of these: *Faust* by Goethe, *Ode to Joy* by Beethoven, and *The Pieta* by Michelangelo. The reason for bringing up the former themes in the latter stages of life may be the result of the characteristic of the elderly's need to return to the past and give expression to what they held dear. Somehow, back then, they did not realize how important that was for them or simply they did not know how to find the right means of expression. However, not every creator is characterized by such determination to continue their activity in twilight years. Many seem to show the keen awareness of lowered vitality, the incoming demise and the ensuing end put to their creativity as well. This state of mind was displayed by Juliusz Słowacki in one of his latter poems (Wallis, 1975, p. 174).

In the past I thought of performing crazy deeds,
To call nations into your existence
Presently, though a small corner of the earth shall suffice to dwell
Where I'll put myself in a conch made of planks and let myself drown.

Yet, many creators evince the need to complete their oeuvre, the wish to almost convey "the communication of their will" to get across the essence of their experiences, thoughts, anything which is regarded by them as most essential in life. C. Monet's words are representative in this regard: (...) *I would not like to die having not said what I needed to say, or at least without having tried to do so.*" (Wallis, 1975, p. 174).

In various, often intense, bitter-sweet feelings the older artists, there prevails a melancholic tone suffused with existential thoughts which can be found, among others in the poetic letter of Cyprian K. Norwid. This letter has, again a clearly "testamentary" nature (Wallis, 1975, p. 175).

Diverse abundance shall disappear and creep away
Treasures and strengths shall blow through and the public shall quiver
Out of the things of this world only two will last,
Only two of them: poetry and charity...and nothing more...

Individualism, freedom, the independence from external restraints, from a variety of conditions and conventions makes it hard to establish one, typical style for old age – although there have been many attempts made to this end. Most frequently, the common features found in the works concern the sphere of feelings and spirituality. In the latter works of the grand masters one can find the prevailing romantic air, lyricism, melancholy, the intertwining of fan-

tasy with reality and the penchant for symbols. Critics maintain, for example R. Hamann (after: Wallis, 1975, p.184), that in the creative works of older artists one can observe the alteration of their psyche primarily in the sphere of spiritual life. They take more interest in their interior rather than the surrounding world, they reminisce about the past, work the memories through. Oftentimes they give those memories a fresh, more complete or intriguing expression, artistically. The problem of introversion still remains a contentious issue, though; it is generally thought to increase in the second half of life. Although critics notice such increase of introversion in some creators, (e.g. in Beethoven), others are known to show both the introvert and extrovert tendencies (e.g. Thomas Mann, El Greco). H. Elzenberg shares an interesting opinion (after: Wallis, 1975) that the practical, social personality should be distinguished from the artistic one. Consequently, one can be introverted in everyday life functioning, disengaged from social interaction, but create extrovert content. Many artists' fundamental, natural characteristic traits are projected on the protagonists portrayed in the works they create. The character trait of grand masters the critics find unquestionable, is their inclination to succumb to a metaphysical mood. This inclination can be linked to the tendency mentioned in the first part of the article, observed in normally ageing people. It is displayed via natural loosening of cognitive structures, oft-repeated reveries and thinking which goes beyond the material reality along with the confrontation with the transcendent world. This tendency is known in life-span development psychology as gerotranscendence (Torstam, after: Straś-Romanowska, 2011).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it can be concluded that the creative potential of man does not diminish with the ongoing process of ageing. Depending on the individual personal traits, the said potential can be realized in different ways and to different extents. The modifications in the range of cognitive structures, greater autonomy in thinking and action, as well as the awareness of one's mastery, help a creative individual to act in an unconventional manner. In turn, the wealth of experience with cognitive openness, combined with introversion, considerably direct the attention of an ageing person towards reminiscence of the past. Those memories are willingly subjected to deeper afterthought, reinterpretation and confrontation with transcendent values. This helps the creators to gain an insightful meaning, which goes to prove that creatively active people undergo constant personal development. To paraphrase Victor Hugo's thought one could say that old age has no power over the creator. For a creative person ageing still means evolving⁵.

5 The original version of Hugo's words is as follows: "Old age has no power over geniuses (...). For Dantes and Michelangelos to age is to grow" (after: Wallis, 1975 p. 193).

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