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LONELY, ISOLATED, SELF-EXCLUDED? WHAT IS THE REASON FOR THE ABSENCE OF MALE SENIORS IN CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS?

Abstract. The aim of this article is to present the determinants of the limited presence of senior men in cultural institutions in Poland. The text characterises the context in which older men undertake institutional cultural activity and identifies the main reasons why the scale of their cultural participation is low. The fundamental factors that differentiate the nature of cultural participation are gender, the resulting behavioural patterns and individual adaptation strategies. These themes are analysed in the context of the barriers and problems experienced by male seniors, and the risks of social exclusion within this group are highlighted.

Keywords: male seniors, gender, cultural institutions, cultural participation, social exclusion.

OSAMOTNIENI, WYIZOLOWANI, AUTOWYKLUCZENI? Z CZEGO WYNIKA NIEOBECNOŚĆ MĘŻCZYZN SENIORÓW W INSTYTUCJACH KULTURY?

Abstrakt. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie uwarunkowań ograniczonej obecności mężczyzn seniorów w instytucjach kultury w Polsce. W tekście scharakteryzowane zostały kontekst podejmowania przez starszych mężczyzn instytucjonalnej aktywności kulturalnej oraz główne powody, dla których ich skala uczestnictwa w kulturze jest niska. Zasadniczymi czynnikami, które różnicują charakter partycypacji kulturalnej, jest płeć kulturowa oraz wynikające z niej wzorce zachowań i indywidualne strategie adaptacyjne. Wątki te analizowane są w kontekście barier i problemów, jakich doświadczają mężczyźni seniorzy, a także ryzyk związanych z wykluczeniem społecznym w obrębie tej grupy.

Słowa kluczowe: mężczyźni seniorzy, płeć kulturowa, instytucje kultury, uczestnictwo w kulturze, wykluczenie społeczne.

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1. Introduction

In the last dozen years or so, there has been a great deal of research in Poland addressing the issue of the cultural participation of diverse audiences (Domański et al. 2021; Drozdowski et al. 2014; Płachecki 2018; Szlendak et al. 2019). Some analyses are directly devoted to the topic of seniors' cultural participation (Landsberg et al. 2012; Magala 2013; Mękowski 2013; Słowińska 2019). Explorations conducted with regard to this group usually focus primarily on mapping cultural practices undertaken by narrow circles of older people, often the most active among the entire subpopulation. This optic significantly hinders an in-depth understanding of the determinants of the cultural content consumption and the identification of motivations and aspirations that influence pathways of cultural participation. A theme largely overlooked in the existing body of research on cultural participation is the engagement of male seniors in cultural activity, as opposed to the participation of seniors as a whole. Analysing the existing literature on the subject in Poland, one gets the impression that male seniors are a largely invisible group in the cultural field (Słowińska 2021). The narrative of changes in the cultural field – an almost universal issue in the Polish discourse in this area in the last dozen years (Bachórz, Stachura 2014; Kisiel 2017; Lewicki, Filiciak 2017) – has given limited consideration to the situation of male seniors and their needs when it comes to cultural participation, which raises the question of the real conditions of cultural (non)participation in the studied group.

For the purposes of this text, I assume that cultural participation is a complex, dynamic set of cultural practices. Thus, I recognise that it is a broad category, within which we should consider first and foremost practices directed by the individual towards him/herself (e.g. reading, playing sports), practices directed outwards (e.g. amateur creativity, gardening), and collective practices (e.g. social gatherings, participation in mass events) (Fatyga 2014). An element of collective practices is also traditionally understood as participation in institutional culture, which is of particular importance in the undertaken analysis. This is because the text refers to a large extent precisely to the institutional dimension of participation in culture and the role played in this process by cultural sector organisations. However, in the analysis of the nature and scale of cultural participation of male seniors, it is also worth considering cultural practices undertaken outside the institutional space. This is primarily due to the progressive deinstitutionalisation of culture, i.e. opportunities to participate in culture outside the framework of institutions, and the increasing scope of participatory forms of cultural organisation (Bachórz et al. 2014).

From the point of view of this article, it is crucial to understand the extent to which the deficit of research on the cultural participation of senior men is due to the deficit of cultural involvement within this group, including the (non)presence of its representatives in events and meetings organised within cultural institutions. In

order to be able to define the nature of this relationship, it is necessary to outline the determinants of the cultural activities of senior men and the effects of their various forms of involvement. The models of cultural institutions that address their offerings to representatives of the analysed group, among others, are crucial in this context. The analysis of the scale of cultural participation of older men is important primarily for two reasons. Firstly, it is an indicator of the social activity of the representatives of this group and a factor that may translate into the individual level of quality of life and well-being (Lee et al. 2021). Secondly, it allows us to outline the landscape of this cultural sector more thoroughly, and to recognise the ways in which cultural institutions function in terms of their main socialising agendas.

2. The social situation, needs and cultural participation of senior citizens in Poland

Older people are a diverse group in many aspects. This applies to both demographic and cultural criteria. Sociological analyses of the situation of seniors should acknowledge the fact that there is no single image of old age, and that seniors perform different social roles, corresponding to specific phases of old age that are a combination of various individual and collective conditions (Wieczorkowska 2017). The concept of old age is relative, and biological age may not correspond with social age. It is problematic both to indicate the moment when old age begins and to distinguish particular sub-periods within it. It is most commonly assumed that seniors are those who have reached the age of 60 or 65, with successive decades marking the following phases of life – from old age, through late old age, to extreme old age (Świdorska 2015).

The debate on the social situation and needs of seniors must consider the fact that the ageing process in Poland is intensifying. In 2020, the number of people aged 60 and over was 9.8 million, accounting for 25.6% of the total population, which is 1 percentage point higher than in 2019. Based on the estimates of Główny Urząd Statystyczny (Statistics Poland), the senior population will increase to 10.8 million in 2030 and 13.7 million in 2050. In less than 30 years' time, the proportion of people aged 60 or more will account for 40% of the total population. As today, in the future the majority of the elderly will be women. Currently, there are 139 female seniors for every 100 male seniors (GUS 2021). Also significant is the fact that older men are substantially more prone than older women to have little or no direct social contact with acquaintances and friends (36% compared to 28%) and are more likely to meet others occasionally (GUS 2020a).

The most recent challenge in senior support policies are the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily the experience of social isolation and a deficit in face-to-face contacts. The scale of the problem can be seen from the fact that 59.5% of seniors declared that their mental condition is worse than before the

start of the pandemic (SeniorHub. Instytut Polityki Senioralnej 2021). At the same time, one of the main needs of seniors is to maintain social connections with others. Research carried out during the pandemic in the US shows that while 33% of those under 55 choose increasing the scale of social relationships as one of their five life priorities, this percentage rises to 41% among 65–74 year-olds and 62% among 85-year-olds and those even more advanced in years (Culture Track 2022). Social contacts help to minimise feelings of marginalisation and respond to the stereotyping of seniors as ailing, lonely and lacking the desire to be active (Czekanowski 2012). It is beneficial for older people to get involved in community activities and pursue a variety of leisure activities (Różański 2020). This allows for faster adaptation to change, enables the development of new skills, and has a positive impact on quality of life (Zawartka 2018). These challenges are faced by a significant proportion of seniors, while the scale of the problem increases with age and affects the most elderly to the greatest extent (Szukalski 2013). It is also more acute with those for whom the quality of family ties is low (Luty-Michalak 2017).

The multidimensional diversity of the population of seniors necessitates offering tailored services to representatives of this group, responding to the specific needs of people with different motivations and aspirations (Bojanowska 2014; Komorowska et al. 2014). Analysing styles of ageing, Edyta Bonk developed a typology of seniors based on two variables. The first relates to the scale of activity undertaken (she assumes that older people can be active, motivated to activity or inactive), while the second relates to the fact of seniors' independence or lack of it. Emancipated seniors are active and independent. They include those who are the youngest, healthiest, development-oriented and focused on relationship-building. Home-centric seniors are inactive but independent. They focus on home life and spend their leisure time passively, occasionally taking advantage of institutional offerings. The residents of senior-centres are active but dependent. Their participation in various forms of events depends on the support provided by their carers. Seniors described as fourth-floor inmates are inactive and dependent, the main reason for this being their poor physical condition and the associated reduction in mobility (Bonk, after: Woderska 2020).

Acknowledging the diversity within the senior population (including gender diversity) is the starting point not only for considering their subjectivity, but also for developing an individualised approach in creating an offer for representatives of this group. It should also be kept in mind that variations in individual dimensions overlap, resulting in a mosaic of many coexisting senior worlds, which differ according to the socio-demographic characteristics of their participants, their values and their individual life situations. Attention to the heterogeneous needs of older people is also important in the context of seniors undertaking cultural activity, including activities that take place within cultural institutions (Lis, Popławska 2020). The design of the offer for seniors should take into account the fact that for the representatives of this

group, cultural activity – in addition to being a source of relaxation and a tool for self-realisation – can become a basis for establishing and nurturing interpersonal contacts, a way to maintain physical fitness and well-being, a chance to undertake rewarding activities and enjoy a break from the affairs of everyday life, and above all an opportunity to maintain social activity (Słowińska 2019).

Autotelic, non-instrumental goals of cultural activity can develop as different forms of participation are undertaken. For seniors, however, the notion that cultural participation is a means of achieving various life goals is particularly important. The relationality of practices, the atmosphere of joint activities, and the possibility of community formation in particular, play a crucial role in this context (Gallistl 2021; Słowińska 2019). From the point of view of elderly people, undertaking cultural activities is a value in itself. Their specific manifestations, while often important to individuals, become less important in light of the benefits that accrue from engaging in a particular type of activity. From the perspective of individual benefits for participants, it is also more expedient to engage in activities that are uncomplicated, i.e. those that do not require a high level of cultural competence to undertake (e.g. cinema, cabaret, popular music concerts). This is due to the fact that they appeal to a wider audience, which consequently translates into an increase in the quality of integration in the local community and seniors' individual sense of satisfaction (Toepoel 2011). In general, however, having a sufficiently high level of cultural capital is still important for being able to participate in cultural life (Goulding 2018).

Analyses of cultural activity undertaken by seniors in different countries and social settings show that culture can not only be a potential stimulus for change, but it often becomes a viable tool for change. Participatory culture is at the heart of efforts for good health, including mental health (Fancourt, Steptoe 2019); it contributes to cognitive enhancement (Bernardo, Carvalho 2020), enables new friendships (Stickley et al. 2015), enables the acquisition of new skills and the creation of collective identities (Woolrych et al. 2021), and has a positive impact on well-being (Lee et al. 2014).

Appropriately designed interactions can produce a range of positive outcomes for recipients. However, the problem is that the specific offer is often not adapted to the needs and expectations of seniors (Kiedrzyńska-Tui 2015). As a result, the scope of positive changes is limited in terms of the scale of impact, or the beneficiaries of the offer include only a narrow group of people. Involving seniors in cultural activity is also often action-oriented and project-based. Interesting initiatives, such as the regular “Culture Weekends for Seniors”,¹ are an important

¹ The annual “Senior Citizens Weekend with Culture” is organised under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Several hundred cultural institutions across the country take part in the campaign, offering the opportunity to take advantage of the institution's current offer (including exhibitions, thematic walks, concerts, lectures, author meetings, gym classes) free of charge or at a symbolic rate.

element of the offer for older people, but they are not a systemic solution. Targeting the offer exclusively at a group of elderly people can also have negative results. This separates them from the intergenerational experience and deprives them of the opportunity to accumulate experiences of cultural participation outside their own group (Słowińska 2014). The barriers that older people experience as potential participants in cultural life are also a significant problem. Health problems, low levels of social network density and logistical difficulties make it difficult to participate in cultural events and gatherings (Keaney, Oskala 2007). The frequency of cultural participation is also negatively affected by a deficit of financial resources and a sense of shame and incompetence in relation to actively receiving cultural content in institutions (Bachórz et al. 2014).

The generally low priority assigned to this sphere is also not insignificant for the specificity of seniors' cultural participation. When asked "What is the most important thing in life for you?", only 0.3% of seniors choose contact with culture and the arts as one of the five most important factors² (Fatyga 2014). The scarcity of research dedicated to analysing older people's experiences of cultural participation (not only in Poland, but also globally) makes it fundamentally difficult to determine the main reasons for the secondary role of culture in seniors' value systems (Chacur et al. 2022). The declines in the levels of participation of older people in institutional forms of activity recorded in 2020 are more than likely attributable to the repercussions of the pandemic (GUS 2021). However, monitoring of the magnitude of change will be necessary to determine the extent to which reduced activity in institutions will return to the levels observed before the start of the pandemic.

The characterisation of the social situation of seniors in Poland in terms of their needs and the conditions of their cultural participation contains a number of general comments on the condition of this specific and diverse subpopulation. It provides an introduction to a more detailed analysis of the context in which male seniors function in the cultural field. On one hand, they experience a number of challenges as described above; on the other hand, there is a range of processes specific only to this group that need to be discovered and explained. It is symptomatic that a meta-analysis of seventy studies on the importance of cultural participation for feelings of well-being and the quality of social ties shows that the researchers primarily include the perspective of women aged 65–75 in their analyses (Centre for Cultural Value 2022).

² However, it should be noted that in the general population this percentage is also very low, at 0.6%.

3. Culture+SENIOR.³ Case study of an attempt to encourage seniors' cultural participation in Gdynia

The immediate inspiration for this article were the reflections from the evaluation of the Culture+SENIOR project⁴ implemented by the Pomeranian Film Foundation in Gdynia⁵ that lasted from October to December 2021.⁶ The analysis of this case study allows for a better appreciation of the nature of the offer aimed at seniors. The project was addressed to people aged 60 and over, living in the Tricity agglomeration. It was aimed at encouraging the social and cultural participation of seniors in order to reduce their feelings of loneliness and social exclusion. The project offered the chance to participate in a wide range of cultural and recreational activities, in response to the need for seniors to spend free time with others, and was ultimately aimed at having a positive impact on the well-being of the participants.

The project consisted of approximately 60 free events and meetings, including: (1) film screenings and meetings, (2) author meetings, (3) visits to cultural institutions, (4) creative workshops, (5) guided thematic walks and (6) physical activities. The evaluation of the project was based on the analysis of the empirical material acquired during the implementation of the task. This used: (1) a survey questionnaire carried out during the events (n = 341), (2) reports of volunteers who coordinated the course of individual meetings (n = 36), (3) a survey questionnaire on undertaking cultural practices by the inhabitants of Gdynia (n = 56), (4) final reports of volunteers summarising the coordination of activities in the project (n = 6), (5) individual in-depth interviews with volunteers (n = 2), and (6) analysis of existing data on the project available on the Internet. Due to the specific nature of the task, the collected empirical material was not representative, but data were collected during the project in a systematic way on the occasion of different events, from a significant proportion of the people participating in them. The information obtained provided an insight into the opinions of participants in the project events and the context of the activities carried out. An important addition to the material from the survey questionnaires were the reflections of the volunteers, many of whom belonged to the project's target audience of 60 and over. The data collected focused on the evaluation of individual events and feelings about the reception of the offer. The aim of this exercise was to obtain information about the strengths and weaknesses of the project.

³ Original spelling, as per the name of the submitted application for the implementation of the task.

⁴ The product of the evaluation was a report. This material was not publicised by the organisers.

⁵ Pomeranian Film Foundation is the organiser of Polish Film Festival and the coordinator of Studio Cinema Gdynia Film Centre.

⁶ The project received funding from the NOWEFIO Civic Initiatives Fund Programme for 2021–2030, financed by the National Liberty Institute – Centre for Civil Society Development. The task was implemented as part of Priority 2: Civic organisations for the common good, which was intended to support increasing civic activity and self-organisation in order to raise the level of social capital.

The data shows that participants were very positive about the events they attended and would be willing to recommend that their friends come to similar events. The frequency of participation in various cultural activities outside the project was described as rather low (with participants going to the cinema being the most frequent). It is noteworthy that motivations were indicated much more frequently than barriers to participation in cultural events. The main factors motivating seniors to participate are the high level of the offer, the possibility of self-development and the low cost of participation. Among the barriers, two factors were indicated above all: lack of financial resources and lack of knowledge about the offer. The main reason for participating in specific events organised by the project was the cultural factor (interest in a particular field of art, for example film). The importance of the social factor (the opportunity to spend leisure time and integrate with others by meeting and talking), the recreational/health factor and the competence factor (learning new skills) were also mentioned. Those with higher education were more likely to emphasise the importance of cultural and recreational/health factors, while those with lower education were more likely to emphasise the social and competence element.

The results of the survey, briefly presented above, allow us to understand what function seniors ascribe to the various practices of cultural participation and what they expect from the institutional offer prepared for them. Of particular importance in the context of the analysis is the socio-demographic composition of the collected data. It was noticeable that there was a clear disproportion of participants according to their level of education. More than half of the people had a university degree (55.4%), less than 4 in 10 declared that they had secondary education (39.3%), and 5.4% had vocational education. Even greater disparities were observed in terms of the key dimension of diversity in the senior population, namely gender. Female respondents were by far the predominant group of project participants. Only 8.4% of the survey questionnaires shared at the events were completed by men. Similarly, the proportion of survey questionnaires on undertaking cultural practices completed by men was low (9.1%). For every one male senior citizen taking part in project events, there were nine female senior citizens. This arrangement of the collected data not only makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to compare the results by gender, but above all provides an interesting example of the low level of involvement of male seniors in projects intended also for them.

The deficit of involvement of this group was pointed out by both organisers and volunteers. However, it would make sense here to change the language convention to female organisers and female volunteers. After all, the planning of the project, the coordination of the project and the support of the process were predominantly the responsibility of women, for whom the low level of involvement of male seniors in the various activities of the project came as a surprise. When planning the activities, it was assumed that the offer would be attractive to all people over 60, largely regardless of gender.

Women were not only significantly more likely to participate in project events, but were also more likely to interact with posts published on the organiser's Facebook page. Over the course of the project – from October to December 2021 – 69 posts were posted on the page, which were liked a total of 262 times. 68% of the likes came from women and 32% from men. 65% of posts were more likely to receive likes from women and 25% from men.⁷ During the course of the project, consideration was given to what actions should be taken to encourage men to participate in the events. However, the short timeframe of the project made it impossible to make fundamental changes to the prepared plan. It was therefore assumed that the experience gained could be used in subsequent similar projects.⁸ It is worth mentioning that the few men who took part in the events usually participated together with their female partners, more often being persuaded than persuading another to participate. From the accounts given by the female volunteers, it appeared that some of the male seniors who participated in the events signalled that their family members, male colleagues or male neighbours would not be interested in a significant part of the project offer. This was because in their opinion it was not tailored to men's needs and expectations.

However, in their reports and interviews, the female volunteers emphasised – quite apart from the perspective of the men, who were largely absent from the project activities – that the overall task had met with a very positive response from those participating in the individual events. The diverse nature of the offer, the conducive atmosphere of the meetings, the opportunity to build relationships with others, the sense of subjectivity associated with participation and the organisational support from the institutions were well appreciated. The project offer provided a good opportunity to participate in an interesting venture, meet people with similar interests and exchange experiences beyond the day-to-day issues of everyday life. It was pointed out that the value of further editions of the project would be to undertake activities of an intergenerational nature and to involve men more actively in joint activities. The small scale of their participation in the project was thus recognised, as was the need to appeal to representatives of this group in order to encourage them to participate in project activities. Ultimately, this would allow senior men not only to participate in individual events, but above all to broaden the social networks in which they currently function, to gain new experiences and to acquire new social skills. The underlying premise of the project – that it should be conducted “alongside seniors” rather than “for seniors” – would also potentially give older men the opportunity to use their competences, ideas and agency.

⁷ The likes of users whose gender could not be determined were excluded from the analysis. 10% of the posts had no more or fewer likes by users of a specific gender. This relatively high percentage is due to the fact that the total number of likes of some of the posts was very low or zero.

⁸ The Pomeranian Film Foundation submitted an application to continue the activities started within the Culture+SENIOR project in the next edition of the NOWEFIO Civic Initiative Fund Programme for 2021–2030. The project has not received funding.

4. Gender as a differentiating factor in cultural participation among seniors

The gender differences in the nature and scale of cultural participation among seniors are a consequence of the differences seen across the population as a whole. Women are generally more culturally active than men. This applies both to participation in the institutional offer and to involvement in activities that take place outside the space of cultural institutions. At the same time, trends in cultural participation are fairly constant. Data from Statistics Poland for 2019 show that institutional offerings are more frequently undertaken by women, people with higher education, urban residents and younger people (GUS 2020b). The example of reading shows that women's higher level of activity manifests itself not only in the fact that they read more books, but they also talk about and exchange books more frequently than men. Women are also more likely than men to declare that they enjoy reading (Zasacka, Chymkowski 2022).

Variation in the specificity and intensity of cultural participation is a phenomenon observed in many countries. For example, in Scotland in 2020, the proportion of women participating in culture was 10% higher than for men (*Scottish Household Survey* 2022). In Helsinki, women report more frequent participation in 16 out of 18 forms of cultural participation. Men are clearly more likely to attend sporting events and slightly more likely to attend concerts in clubs (Mustonen, Lindblom 2017). Research in Denmark and Finland shows that men are significantly more likely than women to pursue leisure-oriented activities (going to bars, popular music concerts) and DIY activities. Men are also more likely than women to be classified in the cluster of activities associated with low levels of participation in the institutional offer. Seniors also tend to fall into this group (Myrczyk et al. 2022). In Australia, the value of the cultural activity participation rate is 11.7 p.p. higher for women than for men. Among those aged 65 and over, the difference between men and women increases further, to 16.5 p.p. The frequency with which different types of activity are undertaken shows that women are primarily involved in activities such as handicrafts, painting and sculpture, while men's domain is computer games and software, photography and music-making (playing instruments, singing, songwriting) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019). A selective review of data on the variation in the scale of cultural participation by gender suggests that female engagement is stronger than that of men. However, the picture is not uniform – particular activities may be more or less popular with different audiences.

The reasons for the predominance of women in the field of cultural participation are to be found in the early stages of life, during the socialisation period. Girls are more often than boys encouraged to take part in artistic activities, thus they more easily acquire the status of competent consumers of cultural content. In middle-class families it is considered appropriate for girls in particular to be involved in cultural activities. Later on, women are more likely than men to find employment

in sectors related to culture and education, which is also reflected in the preferences and forms of cultural activities undertaken. The frequency and nature of cultural participation is also influenced by the circumstances of family life. In the ever-popular traditional model of family relationships, it is primarily women who are responsible for deciding on the various activities undertaken by household members, including cultural activities (Christin 2012). Engaging in cultural practices also requires having sufficient free time and a willingness to devote it to activities that are perceived as feminised. Interestingly, in countries with a strong focus on gender equality, the gender gap in cultural participation is smaller. This is largely due to men's willingness to take on new social roles and engage in activities that may traditionally be seen as unmanly. Data suggests that the shift towards an equality model is clearly slower in Eastern European countries than in Western European countries (Lagaert, Roose 2018).

The described evolution has little to do with the contemporary generation of seniors, who were socialised on the basis of experiences gained in past decades. Male seniors may be largely attached to a model of traditional, hegemonic masculinity, based on the pursuit of dominance, control over emotions, self-sufficiency and the achievement of high social status (Burn, Ward 2005; Connell 2005). These values provide an essential counter to the nature of the cultural field, based on principles of community, solidarity, inclusivity and openness to giving and receiving support. The masculine expectation of independence and assertiveness may therefore be a barrier to engaging with a field whose logic is programmed for different kinds of interactions and relationships than those best known to men. For male seniors, attachment to the traditional script of masculinity is a source of satisfaction and maintaining a correspondingly high level of life satisfaction. That holds true even if the realisation of this script comes at the cost of weakening the quality of social networks (Thompson, Whearty 2004) and with the knowledge that the ageing process is a period of uneven struggle against the limitations of one's physicality (Ratzenböck et al. 2022).

However, the vision of men as lone wolves at war with themselves, seeking formulas for maintaining the status quo associated with power, agency and autonomy, is not a universally valid model of contemporary masculinity, including that experienced by seniors. For example in Canada, male seniors playing curling were able to transform a pattern of hegemonic masculinity by taking care to build relationships with others and emphasising interdependence within the community to which they belonged (Allain, Marshall 2020). The success of changing the relationship model to a non-traditional one from the men's point of view may be due to several factors: their ability to influence how the conditions for action (co-creation, integration and conversation) are organised, to meet people with similar interests and to engage in a liked activity. Fulfilling these conditions will partly offset feelings of tension about entering a new, unfamiliar environment and reduce fears of potential exclusion or feelings of non-acceptance (DiBello et al. 2020).

The Canadian equivalent of curling in the Polish context could be fishing, DIY, collecting or automotive (Kluczyńska 2011). From the perspective of male seniors, it is important that they are the ones who can set the “rules of the game” and engage in practices in line with their vision of themselves as men (Watts 2015). However, it is less important whether the activity is undertaken within an organisation (for example, a community centre or sports club), an informal group or on their own. The opportunity for choice and sense of empowerment associated with engaging in specific activities is a key factor for older men in their motivation to become active. They also value the feeling of being needed and being able to pursue activities that are considered meaningful (Bredland et al. 2018). Male seniors value both the possibility to do activities on their own and those undertaken in groups. The challenge for them in terms of social and cultural activities, however, is the moment when the physical capabilities of the body clearly weaken, mainly after the age of 80 years⁹ (Janke et al. 2006). It is then more difficult for them to act “shoulder to shoulder” with other men and to step into their valued role as supportive close guides (Słowińska 2021).

Many activity formulas based on the values, needs and aspirations of older men can be implemented by cultural institutions. Simultaneously, the deficit in the presence of representatives of this group is often noted by event organisers. This is attributed largely due to a lack of knowledge of the actual expectations and possibilities of engaging senior men in institutional activities. If cultural institutions were to consider the creation of their programme offer from a “male perspective”, this would provide a counterbalance to the current way of thinking about running cultural organisations. Although they are formally oriented towards reaching both women and men, in practice they mainly target the expectations of senior women. In order to be more effective, activities targeting men should instead involve them in institutional activities long before they enter senior age (Nurmi et al. 2018). Proposals aimed at this group should also be diverse and, wherever possible, they should also be consulted with its representatives. Moreover, initiatives aimed at older men must take into account the diversity within this group. This is important, for example, from the point of view of the differing and changing physical and mental conditions of the target audience.

The opening of cultural institutions towards older men can also be achieved through an in-depth diagnosis of the needs of this group and the resulting changes in the strategy of the institutions. As a result, they could take on the role of creators of new ideas, not necessarily directed to specific audiences in terms of sectors (Bachórz et al. 2014). Acting in accordance with the logic of the emerging model of the extended field of culture the disseminating model of the cultural field would require institutions to pursue a strategy of involving people from communities that hardly benefit from the current institutional offer. It would also be an opportunity for

⁹ Research was carried out in USA.

senior men to open up the institutional cultural sector to new spaces for action and new types of practice. This is because it is clear that many of the activities that older men undertake (for example, those related to DIY or motoring) do not fit into current institutional programmes (Czarnecki et al. 2012). Cultural institutions, however, are certainly needed by male seniors who face a stronger excess of leisure time which they are unable to manage in a constructive way when compared with women (Kramkowska 2014). Although seniors are defined as full-time recipients of institutional activities (Szlendak 2010), men are in a minority in this group. For various reasons many of them do not visit cultural institutions at all. By overlooking the representatives of this group, cultural institutions make it difficult for male seniors to conquer feelings of marginalisation and loneliness, ineffectively covered by attachment to the traditional model of hegemonic masculinity.

5. Conclusion

The limited presence of male seniors in cultural institutions is due to two types of factors. These include, on the one hand, the barriers experienced by older people in undertaking social and cultural activities and, on the other hand, the difficulties specific only to male seniors. The co-occurrence of these two types of problems generates a situation of double exclusion that is difficult to overcome. The existing state of research allows putting forward the thesis that many male seniors have found themselves on the margins of the activities offered by cultural institutions. However, this does not always mean that they remain passive and withdrawn from social activity. Their involvement is often a resource that neither social researchers nor decision-makers in cultural institutions recognise. To some extent, the scarcity of research on the participation of male seniors in cultural activities is a consequence of the low cultural participation of representatives of this group. It should be borne in mind, however, that focusing on the study of selected types of cultural participation (the most popular and the most eagerly promoted by institutions) leads to a situation in which the activity of people whose involvement is less visible, and sometimes completely overlooked, may disappear from the research horizon. This group includes a significant proportion of activities undertaken by male seniors.

The deficit of institutional offers tailored to the needs of older men has a number of negative consequences. It does not enable representatives of this group to experience the benefits of participating in events and meetings organised within the institutional cultural sector. Older men are thus not beneficiaries of the cultural leverage mechanism through which they can, for example, enjoy better health, make new contacts and increase their individual well-being. If the deficit in cultural engagement is accompanied by a deficit in other forms of social activity, male seniors are at risk of increasing levels of loneliness and experiencing social isolation more acutely. The low presence of older men in events organised by

cultural institutions does not necessarily mean that they do not need to be part of them. It is rather an evidence of a structural mismatch between the logic of cultural institutions and the needs and expectations of the absent audience. This state of affairs is also an offshoot of the weakness of Polish cultural policy (Zbieranek 2021), which only to a limited extent offers and develops solutions addressed to seniors, including: male seniors.

The distancing of representatives of this group from activities in the field of culture, above all in its institutional edition, is a consequence of following traditional socialisation trajectories. By that token, many men are attached to a pattern of activities of hegemonic masculinity, striving for domination and self-sufficiency, and thus also incompatible with many registers of the cultural sector, especially in the era of its progressive opening and egalitarianisation (Bachórz et al. 2019). When entering a democratic cultural environment, men have to struggle with trying to understand often unfamiliar rules, putting them at risk of making mistakes and discovering their weaknesses. In contrast to active female seniors, many older men have limited experience of contact with cultural institutions as places for informal education and establishing new types of relationships, and may therefore avoid entering an unfamiliar world.

At the same time, however, male seniors have the ability to “hack” both the existing patterns of masculinity and the resulting adaptive strategies for engaging in cultural activity. This requires the support of the social environment, including their significant others, as well as favourable institutional conditions tailored to male needs, for example the opportunity to determine the rules on which their participation in cultural life will take place. By incorporating the male point of view, cultural institutions can reach a wider audience than before, resulting not only in their inclusion in the circulation of institutional activities, but also in the opportunity for the institutions themselves to benefit from the knowledge, skills and experience of this group. The future of building relationships between institutions and senior men will be determined by the quality of the diagnosis of needs within the analysed group. In the long term, this may allow for the creation of a tailor-made offer that meets the real expectations of diverse audiences, thus opening up new avenues for building relationships between partners who have often not had the opportunity to meet before.

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