

## **In search of understanding biographical ageing - a research-based concept**

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*The aim of the article is to understand ageing as a process of lifelong learning through a whole variety of experiences, to consider what ageing in a biographical perspective means, and to investigate the process of biographical ageing within identity formation. The method of the project was based on the employment of in-depth narrative interviews with older Polish migrants now living in Sweden. The author argues that ageing is a natural process of the life cycle and is socially and culturally constructed and that consequently everyone experiences this process individually. One of the paper's conclusions is that we do not age according to the numbers of years we live, but due to our life experience and the social-historical contexts in which we have lived. Furthermore, we age due to the biography we re/construct while we are ageing during our life course. Ageing, from a biographical perspective, is a learning process in which people re/construct their lives with social, educational and cultural contexts and from which they draw from their experiences relating to social practices and historical events.*

**Keywords:** *biographical ageing, older migrants, life experiences, lifelong learning, identity formation, narrative gerontology*

## **Understanding ageing and old age in the light of narrative gerontology**

While ageing, we become (more) invisible. Older adults are often left with internal struggles about health, isolation, loneliness, lack of duties, money and sometimes about gender. They are often portrayed as ‘the others’, as unproductive and problematic for society and they try to escape from such labels as ‘old’ (Moen, 2016). The younger generation, often forget that the behaviours of the older people they face are based on the experiences they have gone through. Thus, considering the various experiences and historical events of diverse ageing cohort’s population, we need to understand that such events might produce structural changes and contribute to the individualised trajectories of the life course and ageing process.

Peter Alheit (2018, p.11) asserted that:

*“In the development of a modern society the life’s journey is no longer predetermined therein but instead becomes more variable for both the individual as well as for whole groups in society through educational processes and social mobility, migration and technical-cultural change”.*

This view corresponds closely with my way of understanding and perceiving ageing in a post-modern world. Ageing is no longer preordained and scheduled, there is no single pattern of ageing, although ageing is socially constructed, we are age individually. The meaning of age and ageing has varied in different societies, cultures and points in history (Hockey & James, 2003 p.4). Ageing is a process that is managed and negotiated by individuals in different ways, through the use of different resources and strategies, at various points in life, with different consequences and effects (Hockey & James, 2003). Ageing, in this sense, becomes more variable for both the individual and society, and multidimensional too. Understanding ageing as a process means that we are becoming older instead of being older. Ageing is a process of growing older, which is dynamic, interactive, subject to the twists and turns of life, chance, change and complication, and is exemplified by complexity, thus in this sense we become more unique and more distinctive with age, not less (Randall, 2007).

We can determine the objective age however, across the life course, each of us individually learns what aging is and then we feel or label ourselves

'old'. Referring to Giddens (1991), the post-traditional self, becomes an ongoing, embodied project, and I argue that ageing also turns into an ongoing, lifelong project. Ageing is a significant resource through which individuals construct their biographical narratives across the life course, both in terms of the past, looking back from old age and looking forward (Hockey & James, 2003). As Randall (2013, p. ix) claims:

"One of the more exciting developments in gerontology at present lies in the use of narrative approaches and perspectives in exploring the complex - yet under-researched - 'inside' of ageing. With its focus on biographical more than, say, biological aging, the resulting subfield, known loosely as 'narrative gerontology', is enriching our understanding of how we change subjectively over time; of how we change, that is, with regard to our sense of identity as a consequence of the continual weaving and reweaving within us of memory, emotion, and meaning".

Birren, Ruth and Kenyon (1996) have also stressed the importance of narrative within ageing studies because it provides a medium for investigating both the similarities and differences of human ageing over the life course. They emphasized that narratives may reveal some of the complexities and contradictions that are embedded in the experience of ageing and show the re/construction process of different identities over the life course. Moreover, employing the biographical approach to gerontology also enables us to identify how cultures, subcultures, or family patterns are reflected in individual lives. It can also reveal how some people adapt, expand, or fight the possibilities and limitations of the historical period in which they live (Birren, Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). These insights are important to this paper because by exploring ageing through narratives, we can learn more about the complex, "inside" of aging. Therefore, I use a biographical perspective as the research framework for developing the concept of biographical ageing and learning within identity formation as presented in this paper.

### **The biographical approach as the research framework**

Acknowledging the work carried out to date by narrative gerontology (Birren, Kenyon, & Ruth 1996; Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes 2010; Randall, 2007) I focus my research on the biographical approach widely recognized and employed in the field of adult education (Alheit, 2009, 2018; Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Bron, 2000, 2007; Bron & West, 2000;

Dominicé, 2000). I use the biographical approach to investigate older people's life experiences, and their ageing and learning process in order to develop the concept of biographical ageing.

Peter Alheit (2018, p.13) highlighted three aspects of a biographical theoretical approach to lifelong learning: temporality, contextuality and reflexivity. This triad can be used also for the analysis of the ageing process. A biographical analysis requires the temporal order and re-order of learning and ageing within the lifespan (Alheit, 2018). Ageing is not a linear structure, but an 'ongoing process'. Time, in the context of ageing, intervenes in various time structures, such as past, present, future, daily life, historical and social time, work time, family time, free time, lifetime, which "leads to the construction of high-order structures of experience and meaning" (Alheit, 2018 p.13).

The second aspect, mentioned by Alheit (2018), contextuality, seems to be crucial for ageing. For example, he has stated:

*"The 'worlds' in which learning processes take place as individual and interactive practices are then not arbitrary learning environments but complex and inconsistently organized and multi- 'layered' social contexts of varying levels of relevance: there are concrete situations, life-settings and structured historical-social spaces that are marked by specific power structures and structures of inequality" (Alheit 2018, pp.13-14).*

The world, as we know it, that we experience, is given to us independently not as a system of individual unique objects, but as a world full of meanings, symbols and purposes. It is subject to constant changes. A person who lives in such a world discovers and explores it through their activities, experience and interactions with others. As Malewski (1997, p. 30) has noted, "the social world is an intersubjective structure which is continuously created by the exchange of sense and meaning in the course of social interaction".

The biographical approach aligns closely with learning and is embedded within societal structures and cultural contexts of interpretation (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). It considers an individual life in its entirety, in all its phases, as a framework for potential learning. Alheit (1995) has used the term 'biographicity' to explain how adults construct and reconstruct their lives as a way to understand their own life construction. 'Life

construction', is generated between twin poles of structure and subjectivity (Alheit, 2009) and is an ongoing forming process of a person's life. Life stories are never isolated products, rather, close links between the story and other social, cultural, and ideological contexts exist, they are contextual.

Reflexivity, the third aspect mentioned by Alheit (2018, p.14) refers to an individual's "learning being understood as a process of 'making experiences' and of the construction of meaning where the subject recursively refers to his or her experiences and yields new knowledge and adventures". Yet, as Schuller (1992, p. 19) has suggested, it is important to note that "not all individuals pass through the same set of stages". This notion of individual construction of meaning in the course of a life of experiences can lead to reflexive learning and ageing, which might change people's perspectives, and thus have transformative capacities (Bron, 2007).

### **Ageing in the context of identity formation**

Each life is situated in a particular limited period of time and therefore besides the biological, social curve of life, there is also an individual curve containing the whole life. With great probability, we can discover in the biographies of people living in particular periods of time certain facts related to external events and accepted social norms. "People's lives consist of periods of different quality that are temporary, transient and at some point absolutely final" (Giza 1991, p.123). In a similar vein, Alheit (2002) has also indicated that everybody has a unique biographical plan, which is revealed while analysing narrative biographies. Nevertheless, narratives are not understood as a transparent window into people's lives as they age, but rather they show the on-going process of ageing and identity transformation. For example, Ruth and Kenyon (1996, p.2) have stated that, "every aging person is unique in important ways and, by emphasizing this uniqueness, we gain access to a rich perspective for the study of aging".

Biographical narrative interviews are designed to enable the interviewee to have the maximum freedom in expressing their own life story from their individual life course perspective. It allows the researcher to follow the meanderings of identity formation (Eichsteller, 2012). These meandering also mean that ageing, as part of our lives, has its own

dynamics with transitions, transgressions, and variable periods, and it is an individual process that leads to a unique biographical ageing plan. Each older adult has a subjective ongoing biography. They build up a biographical plan of everyday actions dealing with external structures and objective facts, life struggles (crisis and successes), hobbies, emotions, habits, and values. Awareness of responsibility for our life course can help us to deal with life's crises. "People have different expectations that sometimes are too difficult to meet, and they struggle to fulfil them as well as their wishes and dreams" (Bron & Thunborg, 2017, p.124).

In disengagement theories, older adults are considered to be incapable of fulfilling their previous roles (connected to their jobs) (Cumming & Henry, 1961), thus identity in older adults can be linked to rolelessness; a collective and shared 'aged identity' marked by decline, loss and withdrawal (Cook, 2018). This position of the identity of the ageing is, however, dismissed in more recent research (Bowling, 2008; Radtke et al, 2016). Thus, in my research, I argue that ageing is an integral process of the life cycle and is socially and culturally constructed, and consequentially everyone has a subjective experience of this process. Older people construct and reconstruct their identity in relation to their life experiences and their interaction with specific environments.

To analyse how life experiences shape the ageing process, I use a theory of biographical work (Bron & Thunborg, 2017), which is conceptualised as a process of formation and transformation of identity over different temporalities and in relation to the specific life settings in people's biographies. Biographical work has its starting point in peoples' experience of their own identity struggles and is located between current life situations and previous experience (Bron & Thunborg, 2017). Bron and Thunborg (2017, p. 122) point out how identity struggles might either lead to "processes of 'floating', that is, a feeling of being fragmented without past or present, and 'anchoring', i.e. feelings of belonging to a specific context or grounded in oneself". This process of re/constructing identity is unstructured, unplanned and timeless and creates spaces for multiple identities in people's biographies.

## **Background of the research**

My wider research project of ageing is designed using a biographical approach. The concept of biographical ageing and learning or 'ageing

biographically' emerges from the analysis of data collected in a project with older Polish migrants. Older migrants are different from older adults in the host population and differ among themselves, and these differences need to be recognized (Wilson, 2000). Migrants are ageing in a country that differs from the country of origin in many cultural, social, political, economic, and even ecological respects. Learning to live in a new country goes hand in hand with ageing. Thus, migration is the context for the continual negotiation of who they are as they age in a foreign country. Migration is a process that emphasizes the importance of a life course perspective, which includes the ageing process.

The main research aim was to consider what it means to age while being a Polish migrant in Sweden, from two perspectives: time (past, present, future) and culture (Polish and Swedish) (Malec, 2012; Malec-Rawiński, 2016, Malec-Rawiński, 2017). I have operationalised this aim to better understand ageing as a process of lifelong learning through a whole variety of various experiences, to consider what ageing in a biographical perspective means and to investigate the process of biographical ageing within identity formation. The research questions are: How do the older adults' life experiences shape their biographical ageing and learning? How do the life experiences shape the ageing process and identity? What does ageing mean for the migrant?

The project's method employed in-depth narrative interviews with older age Polish migrants now living in Sweden. The participant cohort included a diverse group of participants from a range of professional, educational and gender backgrounds. The data collection was conducted in 2010 and 2011. I collected data from seventeen older age Polish adult migrants (men and women), who came to Sweden when they were aged between 30-40 years of age. At the time of the interviews, all participants were over 60 years of age, so most had lived in Sweden for at least 30 years. That they had lived both in Sweden and Poland, and between and in these two cultures, was the main criterion of participant selection. To recruit participants, I used a 'snow-ball' technique.

Data analysis was undertaken using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992; 1995). Grounded theory requires that I follow a careful and discrete sequence of analysis, open coding, selective coding, the discovery and naming of categories (Glaser, 1992). The first stage open coding revealed certain similarities and differences in accordance

with the biographical patchwork of the participants' life experiences. Emergent themes were then coded selectively, and the categories were discovered. In the next analytical step, I analysed how life experiences shaped the ageing process and identity and thus employed a theory of biographical work (Bron & Thunborg, 2017). This theory inspired me to look at the aging process as the process of the re/construction of life trajectories and re/formation of identities as a lifelong process.

For this paper, I have chosen four cases for analysis from four participant's narratives: two men, Jan, and Stan, and two women, Maria, and Jadwiga. These narratives were chosen because I had identified some similarities in their individual biographies: both men are musicians and came to Sweden for musical 'gigs', and the women have been single mothers for much of their lives. To contextualise their biographies, in the following I present four short vignettes explicating their biographies. All participants' names are changed and all of them gave consent.

## **Vignettes of the interviewees**

### ***Jadwiga***

Jadwiga was 90 years of age at the time of our interview. She first came to Sweden as a teenager for a summer course. During that course, the Second World War started, and she stayed in Sweden longer than she had planned. She had a Jewish background; all Jadwiga's family died in the Warsaw ghetto; she was fortunate to have survived while in Sweden. After WWII she returned to Poland intending to help rebuild her country. She described the birth of her son, in 1957, as her great happiness. She and her son lived in Poland until 1968, but after the political events in Poland Jadwiga, like many Jews was persecuted and forced to leave Poland. Jadwiga wrote a letter to a family where she used to work for when she had been in Sweden the first time and she obtained an invitation from them. This prior connection helped her, and with her son she migrated to Sweden. Their lack of money made their initial years in Sweden hard, but Jadwiga overcame these challenges. She worked as a housekeeper, for a few families, and as soon as her situation was stable, she recommenced her studies. When she finished her education, she found work at a university, where she worked until she retired. Her son moved to the USA; he contracted HIV while there and died

after returning to Sweden, still a young man. It was a difficult and hard experience for Jadwiga, losing her beloved son. After her son's death, Jadwiga became a volunteer in HIV/AIDS organisations. Jadwiga lived in Sweden until she passed away in 2019. In her final years Jadwiga's health deteriorated, affecting her balance, and she required a walker to aid her mobility. When her health deteriorated further, she moved to an assisted living facility with fulltime care until her death.

### ***Maria***

Maria<sup>4</sup> was 93 years old when I interviewed her. Her daughter had lived in Sweden for many years, so she migrated to Sweden after retirement for the purpose of family reunion. During WWII and by the age of 24, she was a commandant, lieutenant, general and a spy as well. She discussed the spirit of Polish patriotism and how she was very much involved in the liberation of Poland after the war. She was a brave and strong young woman. As a servicewoman, she was both a right and left-handed markswoman. As a spy she was on the watch all the time. She spoke German, so sometimes she pretended she was German. The necessity for conspiracy, on one hand, made her identity unstable, but on the other hand, it became a natural way of life. When WWII ended, her life went in unexpected directions. In Poland after WWII, a new communist political system took control of the country. Maria was arrested during a roundup, a "łapanka" or "kocioł" in Polish<sup>6</sup>, and she was sent to prison and sentenced to death. However, she successfully defended herself against the death sentence. Thanks to a National Amnesty of 1947, after three years she was released from prison. After coming out of prison, she and her family were persecuted further. Although Maria had a daughter, she never got married. She worked hard and used all her capacities to create "a normal" home and family for her daughter. Migration to Sweden opened a new and transformative chapter in Maria's life. She effectively started a new life and while learning Swedish she immersed herself in Swedish culture. In the meantime, she had become an important person for the history of Poland. In the Polish town where she was persecuted and could not stay after leaving prison, they built and named the Chamber of Memory in her honour. I met her just before her death from cancer. She seemed fulfilled and happy with the life she had lived.

## **Stan**

Stan, 65 years old at the time of the interview, was a musician all his life. He had been playing various instruments since he was a child. He was very good at playing and that made him a famous musician in Poland during the 60s. He travelled a lot internationally, giving concerts in Europe, in America and in Russia. The hotels in various cities and countries, became his home. He also set up his own band, which was popular in Poland at that time. He was married to a Russian woman but after a while they divorced. He came to Sweden for the first time for music 'gigs' around 1971. In Sweden at the beginning, he was a member of a band, but when the contract finished, he searched for some networks to find another 'gig'. He went to the north of Sweden where he was shocked by the cultural differences and where Swedish seemed very foreign to him. Searching for 'gigs' he went to England to play and to earn money to live on for short period, while he had already settled in Sweden. In the following years, he played with different bands in different places in Sweden. For the first couple of years, he did not speak Swedish but communicated only in English and he noticed how many Swedish dialects exist, which made Swedish even more complicated to him. In Sweden, he met another woman and when a son was born, it helped him to decide to stay in Stockholm. He was a teacher at various schools, but he gave that up as it was not for him. Thus, as he was bored of playing with a band, he tried to teach children to play various instruments. When he retired, he continued to give private saxophone lessons and travelled to Poland as often as possible or when invited. He used to have many women around him but now he is single. He likes the Swedish way of thinking and living, but he longs for Poland and recognition as a well-known musician.

## **Jan**

Jan was 67 years old when I held the interview. When he was a child, his family migrated from the east to the west of Poland after WWII, due to the new formation of Polish borders. When he was a teenager, his father passed away and as a very young boy, he had to face many challenges and difficulties. He had to work to help his mother to make ends meet. To avoid military service, he attended the pedagogical school of music (two years after high school) where he set up a band with a few colleagues.

He wanted to play the guitar, but the teacher forced him to play double bass instead, and he started to like it. He practised a lot, and he played better and better. The band he used to play in won some prizes and he got some gigs outside Poland. In the meantime, he got married and his family started to grow. He learnt English from a book, so when he came to Sweden for the first time in 1972 to play with a Swedish orchestra, he already spoke some English. When the Swedish orchestra he had been playing with disbanded, Jan lost his job and returned to Poland. He started to renovate the house that his wife had bought. However, his network had already become wider in Sweden, so he travelled back and forth from Poland to Sweden to play gigs for around 10 years. During that time, he also went to the USA for a concert tour. When the period of martial law began in Poland (1981-83), he was in Sweden and he managed to arrange to bring his wife and two daughters to Sweden too, where they all received permanent residency. In the beginning, they lived in the north of Sweden, where he had music gigs, and then they moved to Stockholm. Two more daughters were born, which deeply rooted him to Sweden. He started to learn Swedish informally (tv, newspapers, books, in-formal everyday talks) and now he speaks Swedish very well. He got a Swedish driving license and became a taxi driver as his main job. He was retired at the time of our interview, but he still plays the double bass, though more for fun than as a way of earning money for a living. He has four daughters, which has made him a grandfather of many granddaughters and grandsons. A few years ago, he suffered a heart attack. The family and the music seem to be important.

### **Ageing within identity formation in the context of life experiences**

The analysis of the four life stories revealed many categories for discussion. However, in the following I elaborate on the four main categories as follows: experiences of migration, Second World War experiences, post-war experiences, and family. These categories are the 'red threads' in the life trajectories of those four cases, and they are important issues for the ageing process.

As all the interviewees were older Polish migrants, migration was clearly one of the common (core) experiences that all of them have shared. Being a migrant is a challenge when encountering a new culture, new settings, and new environment. As the research shows, the 'gate keeper' to the culture, a facilitator who introduces the important issues to the

newcomer plays quite an important role, especially at the beginning of the migration process. Jan and Stan came to Sweden for musical gigs, which was a type of invitation, thus both had a gate opener, as did Maria and Jadwiga. Maria's daughter had already lived in Sweden for some time and Jadwiga knew a family who helped her. All of them have been living in Sweden for over 30 years. Thus, they are not so much Polish anymore and 'not enough/yet' Swedish. As Jan said:

*I became too Swedish, for sure, because I do not know if I would have managed to come back to Poland, find myself there ... maybe, maybe? But I'm not sure. Well, a man is a bit weird, you know, a little bit you know, maybe a little strange. I do not know how to explain it, well... you get another perspective.....*

Sweden is for them a place of learning and becoming neither Polish nor Swedish – where they are forming something 'in between', and it is a place of ageing as well. Living 'in between' they negotiated who they are - they are anchored in Sweden but directed into Polish culture like Jan and Stan who long for Polish culture or like Jadwiga who said:

*I was not and will not be Swedish. It is primarily related to culture and language. I am culturally linked without comparison, more to Poland than to Sweden. This ... that cannot be changed.*

Thus, encounters through migration were experienced parallel with the process of ageing, which had started already while they collected experiences of WWII and the post-war period in Poland. Experiences of WWII were like a weight Maria constantly carried with her as a vigilance to her nation, while they were unforgettable to Jadwiga in a different way due the loss of all her family during the war. The war left very painful traces in the life course trajectories of both women. When they migrated to Sweden, both women, due to their experiences and ethical backgrounds, became very engaged in Polish affairs – Jadwiga more from a Jewish perspective and Maria from a historical perspective.

Both men were born just after WWII, so they grew up in the destroyed Poland and they faced the consequences of the post-war political changes. The prolonged consequences of the post-war period were noticeable in the experiences of all four participants as experiences of 'floating' and 'anchoring' (see figure1). However, the consequences of

the post-war period are visibly marked in the experience of Jan's family, which was resettled from the east to the west of Poland due to the new formation of the Polish borders. Research has shown that it was very difficult and demanding for resettled families (Niedźwiecki, 2000). Many of those displaced people could not adapt to the place that was not 'theirs' – 'their' places were left in the east of Poland. As Jan said:

*I was born in Radzyń, in the east of Poland, I was one year old, we came to ... near Wrocław to a small village ... (...) we were from the east, they [authorities] resettled us there, to the west, to the so-called regained land. And they [family] chose a cottage there, (...) I was about a year, we came to this village [sigh] (Jan)*

Jan also lost his father as a young boy, which made his life highly complicated. However, his musical skills gave him the opportunity to earn money and travel abroad, facilitating periods of floating and anchoring, in other words feelings of being fragmented without a past or a present, and at the same time feelings of belonging to a specific context (see Bron & Thunborg). Music, and the ability to play instruments were the passport to the world outside Poland for Jan and Stan. Stan made a significant career as a musician that gave him a permit to travel around the world. He used to live a very artistic life and he was very popular without having a 'real home' (hotels were his home), with periods of floating and without anchoring long in one place.

Maria was learning her entire life, and she experienced mainly floating periods in the post-war time. She said:

*I was constantly learning, you know, I was constantly changing because actually this whole life is something else, I had to learn from something else, I didn't live just in one way but some object in a given time that forced me to live, the most difficult part was my private life because it was crammed full not in the way I would have liked, but the way it was fated to be [...] it caused a life that was not my life, but life for something, for some idea, or for some private thing, not mine, but let's talk about childhood and youth, there's not much to say because it is a short period, but the most wonderful one.... (Maria)*

Arrest, prison, the death penalty, and then persecution and attempted suicide, left unforgettable traces in Maria's life trajectory. As she said

(...) in the meantime, I had such a terrible experience that I wanted to throw myself off the bridge (...) I couldn't cope anymore, I went through so much, I was all strong, and then I became so weak that I completely broke down, but then somehow, I came back. She experienced anchoring when she migrated to Sweden, and then she started (...) the second part of my life [in Sweden] ... (It was) the better one (...). (Maria).

Jadwiga came back to Poland after WWII to help contribute to the rebuilding of a devastated Poland. After she gave birth to her much-loved son, she felt anchored. As she said (...) in 1957 my son was born. It was the greatest happiness. However, in 1968 her life turned into a period of 'floating'. She was persecuted and forced to leave Poland, for being Jewish.

*In 68, I also had a lot of trouble. Someone ... I was at some conference when I came back, there was a star of David drawn on my door and I ... I didn't think about emigrating then. But ... I was invited by my friend, who was a professor in America, to Paris with my little son. In 68 on April 1, we left for Paris. And then it was May, and I got a telegram from my close friend in Warsaw that I was didn't have a job. I decided not to return to Poland and wrote to my bosses (Jadwiga).*

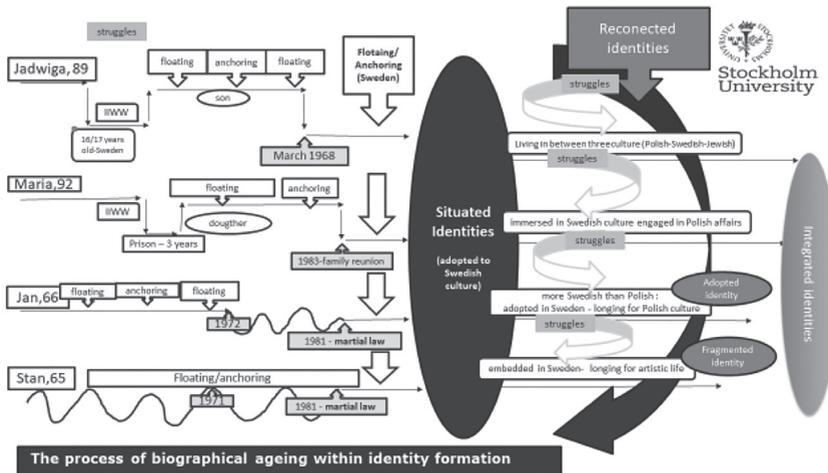
The beginning in Sweden was a floating period for Jadwiga as she said: (...) *well, I had a hard time experiencing this emigration. Already when ... we moved here, I used to wake up for years and I didn't know where I was. Time went by and Jadwiga felt happy and anchored in Sweden (...) now I am very happy to be in Sweden. And I am glad that we were in Sweden with my son (...) in general, compared to Poland, huge luxuries, unheard of.*

The family seemed to play a significant role in the context of the life decisions made by all four participants. Maria and Jadwiga's lives were spent as single mothers. Maria gave birth to her daughter in a floating life period and at the time she did not know what motherhood meant. Nevertheless, during her entire life, she took care of her daughter. Jadwiga gave birth to her beloved son in an anchoring period of her life and built up a very strong relationship with him. He convinced her to migrate to Sweden. Even though he passed away many years ago, she always celebrated his birthday with his friends. Stan does not have a family that he lives with, however, he has a son. When he was born,

Stan took the decision to stay in Sweden. Jan has a very large family: a wife, four daughters and many granddaughters and grandsons and he is involved in the family life. In 1981, he had the opportunity to bring his wife and two of his daughters to Sweden, which helped him to make the decision to stay in Sweden permanently.

Figure 1 illustrates the life trajectories of Jadwiga, Maria, Jan, and Stan. The periods of anchoring and floating and dates of the most important life events are marked. It presents the process of biographical ageing within identity formation through lifelong experiences that helped to recognize some of the categories of identities in the light of migrations.

**Figure 1. The process of biographical ageing within identity formation.**



## Biographical ageing

Analysis of this paper’s data shows that ageing, from a biographical perspective, is a learning process while people re/construct their lives with social, educational, and cultural contexts and while drawing from their experiences relating to social practices and historical events. Ageing is a learning process, with struggles and periods of floating and anchoring related to life experiences. As Alheit (2018, p.14) has claimed “the learning process takes place ‘between’ subjects and the worlds relevant to them – and these worlds change and are themselves

historically variable”. Ageing is immersed in life experiences and is a part of the single biographies.

Referring to the three aspects of the biographical approach mentioned above: temporality, contextuality and reflexivity (Alheit, 2018), the discussion of the four migration life stories shows that ageing is not a straight pathway but includes detours, interruptions, stops, disappointments, repetitions, ups and downs and consequently we do not age according to time only but as a result of life events and struggles we experience (like weddings, divorces, migrations, deaths, births, wars, journeys, accidents). Ageing is not a linear structure, it is an ‘ongoing process’. Time, in the context of ageing, unfolds in various time structures - such as past, present, future, daily life, historical and social time, work time, family time, free time, lifetime, which “lead to the construction of high-order structures of experience and meaning” (Alheit, 2018, p.13). Ageing is contextualized, the ageing processes that take place are both subjective and interactive. It is complex and unpredictable organized process with multi- ‘layered’ social contexts of varying levels of relevance. The analyzed variety of life situations, life-settings and structured historical-social-political events of the interviewed people show that ageing is socially constructed and contextualized. Thus, biographical ageing is a complex process of learning to deal with various life experiences through the entire life course. Life experiences intertwine with each other – work experiences, health problems, family struggles, happiness, love affairs, arguments, social problems, migration, stigmatization, floating, disappointment – in the context of social, cultural, political, and historical events and lead to identity re/formation. I understand ageing as the process of the re/construction of life trajectories and re/formation of identities as a lifelong process. This entanglement of various and unlikely life experiences makes the once life unique, uncommon and unpredictable in the context of ageing.

The ‘biographical knowledge’ (Alheit, 2018), coming from the life stories of older people who reflect on their lives, makes up a mosaic of happiness, love, illness, power, powerlessness, privileges, pain and death along with all experiences they go through, and is successively and constantly re/built throughout the ageing process. Telling a life story, the older persons can reflect on their unique life, their struggles and their life crises and can give them meaning in retrospect, grounded in their accumulated experiences and wisdom. This reflection can lead

into reflexive learning and ageing, which have the potential to change people's perspectives, and thus have transformative capacities (Bron, 2007). Self-reflexive ageing leads to accepting all the experiences and transitions that modify life trajectories, all the turning points in life, all the redirections of their life paths. It accompanies the reflective learning, which occurs in tandem with communication and interaction with others, and relations to the social and cultural context (Alheit, 2009).

Analysis of the four narratives also illustrates that ageing is a part of the process of forming and transforming identities. However, this process of forming and transforming identity involves struggles that may lead either to the process of floating, or anchoring (Bron & Thunborg, 2017). As the analysis of the whole interviews seems to suggest, identity formation is a lifelong process and involves ageing.

Being a lifelong process, the struggle for identity entails more than one identity that is in the process of forming and being transformed. The analysis of the four narratives presented a number of diverse identities, which I recognized and named such: 'situated identity', 'working identity', 'integrated identity', 'adapted identity' and 'fragmented identity'. In all analysed cases, I recognized 'situated identity'. Since all they have been adapted to Swedish culture and the place of living and learning. That means they found Sweden as a safe place after being disconnected with their roots, while being persecuted in Poland (Maria), travelling back and forth (Jan and Stan) and because of forced migration (Jadwiga). As a close reading of the data shows, Jadwiga and Maria came close to developing integrated identities. Jadwiga was a knowledgeable woman, living in the context of three cultures and adapted successfully into Swedish society. Maria was immersed in Swedish culture and engaged in Polish affairs. Living in Sweden she started a new, a better chapter of her life. Stan and Jan present, on the other hand, a kind of 'working identity'. They are in the process of forming an integrated identity, however, they have not reached it yet. Jan presents an adapted identity. He is more Swedish than Polish, he has adapted to Sweden – but still he longs for Polish culture. Stan presents a fragmented identity. He is embedded in Sweden, but he longs for an artistic life in Poland. As the analysis shows, it seems that the process of forming and transforming identities is parallel to the process of biographical ageing within identity formation, and that as we age, we do not have one identity, but we face identity struggles constantly.

## **Conclusion**

The study of Polish older migrants in Sweden illustrates that they cannot be simply reduced to their migration experience, but that they also carry with them a myriad of relevant life experiences to the new host country, and rich opportunities for learning: lifelong and life wide. In post-modern society, ageing is no longer - if it ever was - a unitary experience, exclusively characterised by disability, dependency, or poverty (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, p. 209) - it is unpredictable and changeable. New technologies, such as the internet, open new possibilities for older migrants. They can, for instance, search for old friends or members of the family they had been disconnected from because of the Second World War or other experiences. They could be again connected with and visit old friends or family members all around the world. Sweden, the place of residence, gives the interviewees space for reconnection with the past and becomes a platform for the formation of situated identities.

To conclude, as my research shows, ageing is a set of life experiences in which culture, society, and external historical events (e.g. wars, cataclysms) are of great importance. Ageing is not a linear structure; it is an ongoing process. Ageing, from a biographical perspective, is a learning process in which people re/construct their lives with social, educational and cultural contexts and from which they draw from their experiences relating to social practices and historical events. Ageing is the background for forming and transforming identity. We do not age according to the numbers of years we live, but due to our life experiences and the social-historical contexts in which we have lived; we age due to the biography we re/construct as we age.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Ten years have passed since I conducted the first interviews, but subsequent interviews with some of the original older Polish migrant interviewees, who are still alive, are in planning. Although many years have passed since I have conducted the first interviews, the richness and quality of the data are still valid and useful. I have kept in contact with some of these participants since the original interviews. I have talked with them, observed, and continued taking field notes thus my research has become an ongoing project. All interviews were conducted in Polish, which turned out to be an important issue for the

participants. They could easily express their emotions, feelings and talk about their life experiences.

- <sup>2</sup> Some more discussion of Jadwiga can be found in Malec Rawiński M. (2016). Longevity and learning from the biographical perspective: Two case studies - locally rooted and globally oriented, *Andragoška Spoznanja*, Vol. 1, pp.43-56.
- <sup>3</sup> 1967-1968 in Poland was marked by a violent anti-Semitic and 'anti-Zionist' campaign targeting Polish citizens of Jewish ethnic origin and 'cosmopolitans' after the June 1967 6-Day Arab-Israeli War. Student and worker demonstrations for freedom of expression and democracy were met by harsh repression and as a result, many leading, and many unknown, individuals with Jewish ethnicity were forced into exile or deprived of their livelihoods and professions.
- <sup>4</sup> More analysis of Jadwiga's case can be found also in Malec-Rawiński, M. (2017), Ageing and learning experiences: The perspective of a Polish senior immigrant in Sweden, *Australian Journal of Adult Learning (AJAL)*, Vol. 57, nr 3, s. 421-439
- <sup>5</sup> The main resistance force in German-occupied Poland was the *Armia Krajowa* ("Home Army"; abbreviated "AK"), which numbered some 400,000 fighters: one of them was Maria. Throughout most of the war, AK was one of the three largest resistance movements. The main goal of the AK was preparing and conducting the national uprising in case of advancing frontlines or general collapse of the German armed forces. There were complex hierarchical structures - staff, high commands of arms and services, territorial commands (regions, and on a lower level - districts), weapons were collected, officers and soldiers were trained, information about the enemy was gathered (Polish contribution to the Allied victory in World War 2 (1939-1945).
- <sup>6</sup> The term *łapanka* comes from the Polish verb *łapać* ("to catch"). The term was also used for describing the tactic of cordoning-off streets, and the systematic searching of buildings. Such roundups, *łapanka*, were carried out by the Germans during the Second World War. However, the Soviets used similar tactics to round up middle-class Poles in the part of Poland that they occupied following the 1939 invasion of Poland. People were transported to labour camps in remote regions of the Soviet Union or into prisons after the Second World War.

- <sup>7</sup> The Amnesty of 1947 in Poland was an amnesty directed at soldiers and activists of the Polish anti-communist underground, issued by the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland. The actual purpose of the amnesty was the liquidation of coordinated resistance to the newly established communist regime. The promise of amnesty was not kept. Information collected during questioning of the "cursed soldiers" who had revealed themselves led to a later round of arrests and repression, including of those who stayed in hiding.
- <sup>8</sup> A Chamber of Honour is a room, usually in a public building – town hall, public library or similar buildings - named in honour of a noted individual.

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