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## In Search of Opportunities for Development in Old Age. The case of Gerotranscendence Theory

### Abstract

Gerotranscendence seems to be a promising construct in research on successful/positive ageing. The gerotranscendence theory approach to ageing does not focus on the losses associated with the ageing process, but points to opportunities for harmonious living when these losses are inevitable. The theory may be attractive from the perspective of research on the education of seniors, as it shows the possibilities for development even for people who are very advanced in age and in poor health and physical condition.

This article aims to present Lars Tornstam's gerotranscendence theory from the perspective of a researcher dealing with learning in late adulthood. The text presents the main assumptions of the theory, its origins, and a brief overview of research on gerotranscendence conducted to date, including research conducted in Poland. Areas that have been the subject of debate with the author of the gerotranscendence theory have also been identified in articles published in the subject literature. The last part has been devoted to the educational and practical implications of the theory in question.

**Keywords:** gerotranscendence, learning in late adulthood, late adulthood.

### Introduction

In 1985, and then in 2008, Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam conducted a survey on the feeling of loneliness among young people and older adults (Tornstam, 2011). Analysis of the data collected, both from 1985 and from the

study conducted 23 years later, showed that, contrary to common sense assumptions, the degree of loneliness not only does not increase with age, but even decreases. This would mean that older people are more adept at managing the challenges of daily life than younger individuals and are less prone to feelings of loneliness. According to Tornstam, the key to explaining these results may lie in his gerotranscendence theory. According to the author himself, this is a theory of 'positive ageing' (Tornstam, 2011), the basic element of which is a change in the perspective of perceiving oneself and the surrounding world. The theory states that human development towards gerotranscendence is related to redefining oneself and one's relationships with other people. In the course of this development, there is also a change in the interpretation of the existential questions one asks oneself throughout life. Thanks to this modification of perspective, people are better able to cope with the changes taking place in their lives. According to Tornstam (2011), approximately 20% of the population achieves a high level of gerotranscendence.

In recent years, interest in Tornstam's theory has grown in scientific literature (cf. systematic literature review by Pamuk et al., 2025). Publications cover areas such as nursing, psychology, psychiatry, religion, education and educational research, public, environmental and occupational health, medicine, and linguistics.

In studies on learning in late adulthood, the gerotranscendence theory can be inspiring because it allows us to see the potential for development in old age, showing that even very old people can develop and that a person can mature towards wisdom until the end of their life.

In this article, I present the main assumptions of the theory and its origins. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of the research conducted to date on gerotranscendence, discussing the most commonly used research tools in quantitative analyses of this phenomenon. Next, I focus on polemics with the author and articles critical of the theory published in the literature on the subject. In the last part, I show the educational and practical implications of the theory.

## **The gerotranscendence concept and its origins**

The term 'gerotranscendence' was introduced into the language of psychology by Lars Tornstam in 1989.

The core of this term is the concept of "transcendence", understood as transcending the boundaries of the existing worldview, including the boundaries of one's own self (in this context, we are talking about self-transcendence), aimed at achieving full humanity, personal perfection and a deep sense of meaning in life (Straś-Romanowska, 2017, p. 567)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English of the original texts are the author's own translations.

For Tornstam (1989), gerotranscendence development is related to wisdom. In older people, the process of gerotranscendence plays an important role in adapting to old age. This process consists of a personal transformation leading to the attainment of life wisdom. Tornstam (1989, p. 60) formulated the following definition: 'a shift in meta-perspective from a materialistic and rational view to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction.'

The changes that occur as part of the gerotranscendence process take place in three dimensions (Tornstam, 2011): the cosmic dimension, the self dimension, and the social and personal relationships dimension.

The cosmic dimension is characterised by signs of development towards gerotranscendence, such as: redefining the perception of time, space, and objects, redefining the perception of life and death, and a reduction in the fear of death, a sense of cosmic unity with the spirit of the universe. With these changes, the distance between the present and the past becomes blurred.

Changes in the *Self* dimension are manifested in less self-focus and a decrease in egocentricity. People begin to spend more time 'meditating' and become more reflective. As part of the changes in the *Self* dimension, people confront themselves and realise they are not the centre of the universe. The way they perceive their own bodies changes. They accept them as they are and abandon the obsessive struggle for beauty (in the sense of a youthful appearance). Their attention is focused on the needs of other people, especially their children and grandchildren.

Changes within the social relationships dimension involve a decline in interest in unnecessary, superficial social interactions. Instead, there is an increased need for positive, contemplative solitude or care for a specific person (e.g., a spouse). People learn to transcend unnecessary conventions and norms that once limited their freedom of self-expression. Material possessions cease to have their former significance, and people get rid of unnecessary things, i.e., those that do not serve to satisfy their essential needs.

At the root of the gerotranscendence theory is the disengagement theory by Elaine Cumming and William Henry (1961), or more precisely, the controversies and scientific debates that took place in the 1970s around the accuracy of this theory (Tornstam, 2005). According to the disengagement theory, ageing individuals tend to gradually withdraw from social life. It is both social and psychological withdrawal. Social withdrawal involves limiting social contacts and roles. Psychological withdrawal, on the other hand, involves a decrease in interest in one's surroundings and a minimisation of emotional involvement in other people's affairs. The disengagement theory states that not only are older people prone to disengaging from social life, but the process also works in the opposite direction – society is also prone to disengaging older people. According to the

authors of the theory, this is a completely natural process and, if individuals are able to withdraw skilfully, disengagement processes can be beneficial for both society and ageing individuals and can be associated with a sense of life satisfaction and inner harmony among older people. In the 1970s, this position of the proponents of the disengagement theory was at odds with the then widely accepted theory of activity and the assumption accepted by many researchers that the lifestyle in late adulthood should be a continuation of the lifestyle preferred in middle age. Moreover, as Tornstam (2005, pp. 33-36) points out, many gerontologists, including himself, already believed at that time that there was probably something underlying the disengagement theory that had not yet been discovered and articulated, and that this should be sought in order to avoid simplifications or inaccuracies. The intuition of scientists went hand in hand with the feelings of employees (practitioners) who work with seniors on a daily basis. Some of them expressed their doubts about the validity of the approach known as 'activating' the elderly. Reflection on the possible theoretical foundations of the disengagement theory is one of the factors that influenced the development of the gerotranscendence theory.

When discussing the origins of the gerotranscendence theory, Tornstam (2005, p. 40) mentions the work of Erik H. Erikson. According to E.H. Erikson's concept (1982), human development throughout life is an evolutionary process. Development occurs in successive stages, each of which requires a change in the way a person functions, each of which is marked by a crisis (the transition between stages takes the form of a crisis). Each time, coping with the crisis facilitates the further development of the individual's identity. The last, eighth stage is a conflict between ego integrity and despair. As a result of successfully passing through the eighth stage, a person achieves a state of integrity, accepts their life as it was, and is able to come to terms with the fact of the finiteness of their own existence. If they do not achieve a state of integrity, they experience despair and fear of death. By winning the battle between integrity and despair, a person gains wisdom. Tornstam (2005, p. 40) points to a fundamental difference between his concept and E.H. Erikson's proposal. In his opinion, individuals who have reached the stage of gerotranscendence do not refer to their past lives solely with satisfaction and acceptance of what has happened in that life, as is the case in E.H. Erikson's model, where an individual achieving integrity is described. On the contrary, in his opinion, such individuals perceive the previous stages of their lives as a period of immaturity and judge their earlier lives as unconscious. Referring to E only direction, but one of many possibilities that can. H. Erikson's concept of wisdom, Tornstam suggests that E.H. Erikson, in describing wisdom, 'intuitively have come close to what here [in the sense adopted by Tornstam – note by A.K.] is referred to as gerotranscendence' (Tornstam 2005, p. 40). However, gerotranscendence in E.H. Erikson's view is not the lead to wisdom. Bugajska describes it as follows:

the wisdom of the last stage of life, combined by E.H. Erikson with the philosophical nature of ritualisation and ethical social ethos, opens a person to a world of existentially significant values, which can lead to various ways of "being in the world" even in the face of death itself, without excluding gerotranscendence but also without recognising the need to transcend the meta-perspective as the only, most appropriate path of development in old age (Bugajska, 2015, p. 27).

Joan M. Erikson (1997) directly referred to the term 'gerotranscendence' in her proposal to expand E. Erikson's theory with yet another, ninth crisis in the course of life. The crisis of the ninth stage is an intensified version of the crisis of the eighth stage. It is characterised by an even more intense struggle in the integrity-despair conflict. According to the author, at this last stage of life, the scale of challenges is greater than at the previous stage. People are forced to devote all their attention to their own deficits: their senses lose their sharpness, memory problems arise, cognitive disorders and physical limitations make themselves felt. According to J.M. Erikson, the force that has a chance to arise as a result of struggling with the crisis of the ninth stage is gerotranscendence. Although she has, in a sense, integrated Tornstam's theory with her own, it is worth noting the fundamental differences between the positions of these two authors (Verbaak 2000). Tornstam conceptualizes gerotranscendence as a reorganisation of one's relationship with the outside world, encompassing a transformed understanding of one's place in society within the broader universe. This process is based on 'natural, structural developmental changes taking place in the mind of an adult' (Straś-Romanowska, 2017). In J.M. Erikson's view, on the other hand, the condition for gerotranscendence is the resolution of a developmental crisis, which results in personal transformation. For Tornstam, overcoming such a crisis is not necessary to achieve gerotranscendence. Rather, he treats this process as natural changes accompanying the last stage of life, which occur when certain conditions are met (Verbaak 2000). According to Tornstam (1989), the process of gerotranscendence is continuous, gradual (rather than 'sudden') and lifelong. J.M. Erikson's proposal to add a ninth stage to the life cycle is consistent with the currently accepted distinction between two stages of old age: the third and fourth ages. Arguing against J.M. Erikson's position, Polish researcher Beata Bugajska (2015, p. 27) notes that accepting gerotranscendence as the driving force of the last stage is 'a narrowing of E.H. Erikson's theory, a kind of shift towards the ideology of success, which E.H. Erikson warned against, and a certain forced limitation of individual independence.' Bugajska presented her own proposal to add a ninth stage, but in the eighth position (between E.H. Erikson's seventh and eighth stages). The crisis of this new eighth stage can be related to people in the so-called third age. It plays out between *commitment* and *resignation*; within its framework, a person is confronted with their own old age in the dimensions of *soma*, *psyche*, and *ethos* (Bugajska, 2015).

*Commitment* is understood here as ‘choosing one’s own way of being in the world [...] with a sense of acceptance of the changes that are a consequence of the ageing process’ (Bugajska, 2015, p. 29). *Resignation*, on the other hand, is the belief that it is pointless to take any action for one’s own development. However, it is important to note the author’s observation that resignation is not the same as withdrawal. It is possible to be engaged despite withdrawal, deriving joy, for example, from contemplating nature. As a result of a person’s struggle with the crisis between engagement and resignation, courage is born. This is the courage to live in one’s own unique way, the courage to search for oneself and self-fulfilment, to change one’s life according to cherished values, to cope with life’s adversities (Bugajska, 2015, p. 32). In the last, ninth stage, courage is a basic life need. In the last, ninth stage, as a result of the conflict between integrity and despair, wisdom has a chance to develop, which may (but does not have to) lead a person towards gerotranscendence.

Returning to the presentation of the origins of the gerotranscendence theory, one more source of inspiration for its author can be mentioned. It is the scientific work of Erich Fromm. Tornstam (2005, pp. 38–39) refers primarily to Fromm’s reflections on the search for analogies between psychiatry in Western countries and Zen Buddhism. Against this background, he uses a metaphor to illustrate the contrast between the two ways of thinking. Namely, when a representative of Western culture observes a Zen Buddhist meditating, he may describe him as *withdrawn*. The Buddhist, on the other hand, would disagree with this description. He would rather describe himself as *transcendent*. His level of engagement is high, but the representative of Western culture does not see this because he uses a different definition of engagement. As we age, Tornstam writes, we become more and more like Zen Buddhists. We change our way of thinking, our perception of ourselves, the world around us, including other people. We change our understanding of engagement. Note that the above metaphor also illustrates well the fundamental differences between the withdrawal theory and the gerotranscendence theory.

## Empirical research on the phenomenon of gerotranscendence

Below is a brief overview of existing knowledge in the form of scientific texts on gerotranscendence. The overview is narrative in nature and is not a typical systematic review. However, in this study, I take into account, among other things, several scoping reviews recently published by other authors.

According to Tornstam (2005), the theory was formulated based on the results of qualitative research involving interviews with older people. However, there are also opinions in the literature (Hauge 1998) that there are many indi-

cations that the theory was developed by deduction, as a logical conclusion (combined with personal feelings) resulting from analyses and doubts about other theories. Nevertheless, empirical data were certainly crucial for the formulation of the theory.

The author intended to go beyond the framework of positivist gerontology and turn towards phenomenologically oriented gerontology. The analysis of the content of qualitative interviews was an attempt to show how older people understand the concept of ageing. The author sought to ensure that older people, above all, had an influence on the development of the theory, including the definition of basic concepts related to the theory (Tornstam, 2005). The theory of gerotranscendence has been repeatedly verified by the author in both qualitative (Tornstam, 1997b, 1996) and quantitative (1994, 2003, as cited in Tornstam, 2005) studies.

In longitudinal studies conducted over 7 years among people over 80 years of age, Agren (1998) showed that, indeed, more than half of them revealed a change in perspective characterised by deeper altruism, religiosity and life satisfaction. She also noticed a narrowed perception of time and a more active life in the present among the subjects. When it comes to religiosity, it is worth noting that Tornstam did not include it in his theory: 'concept of gerotranscendence does not specifically include a relationship with a higher power' (Jewell, 2014; Dalby, 2006, p. 11). Tornstam clearly stated that he does not use the concept of transcendence in a religious or metaphysical sense. However, there is a whole series of studies showing a positive relationship between gerotranscendence and religiosity (Abreu, Araújo, Ribeiro, 2023). Studies conducted among people of different cultural backgrounds have confirmed the relationship between religiosity (understood as a cultural context) and gerotranscendence. It has been shown that religiosity can influence the development towards gerotranscendence (Lewin, 2001). On the other hand, studies have shown that in non-religious individuals, the relationship between gerotranscendence (spiritual/cosmic) and a sense of meaning in life is stronger (Braam et al., 2006). In a scoping review conducted by Abreu et al. (2023b), six scientific databases were searched for empirical studies examining the correlation between religiosity and gerotranscendence. Seven of the nine studies included in the analysis showed a positive correlation between gerotranscendence and religiosity; one study showed an ambiguous correlation and one showed a negative correlation. The authors of the scoping review point to the weaknesses of previous studies related to the measurement of religiosity as a variable. In eight of the nine studies, religiosity was not assessed using a validated tool, and in some studies, participants were simply asked about their religious affiliation.

Pamuk et al. (2025), on the other hand, used systematic analysis to examine the main themes and new trends in gerotranscendence research. A total of 139

articles published between 1992 and 2024 were retrieved from the Web of Science database. The authors of the review identified the following thematic areas of interest in the literature: care for the elderly and counselling for the elderly, religiosity and reminiscence, intergenerational relationships, and family life. Recently, new areas have also emerged, such as marketing, environmental design, and gerontology. Although the theory of gerotranscendence originated in Sweden, Pamuk et al. (2025) note that its application is becoming increasingly global, with significant research in countries such as India, China, and Turkey.

Research on the theory of gerotranscendence has been conducted in various parts of the world. So far, the theory has attracted the most interest from scholars representing Scandinavian countries. An interesting discovery is the identification of a pattern whereby difficult life situations and crises can accelerate the development of gerotranscendence. Positive changes following trauma (post-traumatic growth) can be seen as an accelerator of gerotranscendence (Weiss, 2014). This connection is also recognised by older people based on their own experiences. Participants in qualitative interviews (Tornstam, 1997b) described life crises as an important source of transformation towards gerotranscendence. The relationship between negative life events and high levels of gerotranscendence in the spiritual (cosmic) dimension was also observed in the studies by Read et al. (2014). At the same time, these studies showed that the absence of such events is associated with low levels of gerotranscendence in the cosmic dimension.

Among the three dimensions identified, the cosmic (spiritual) dimension is treated by Tornstam (1989) as the central element of the theory. The scale for the cosmic dimension in quantitative studies also proved to be the most consistent in terms of psychometric properties (Braam et al., 1998). It has been tested and confirmed that cosmic (spiritual) transcendence is associated with a sense of meaning in life (Braam et al., 2006). People who had lost a loved one in the last year scored higher on the cosmic transcendence scale (Tornstam 1994).

The relationship between gerotranscendence and life satisfaction has been analysed many times. Such studies have been conducted in various countries, in relation to people living in culturally diverse societies. Tornstam (1989) assumed, based on qualitative research, that as gerotranscendence develops, the level of life satisfaction increases. Attempts to empirically verify this assumption have not always confirmed this hypothesis. For example, no such correlation was observed in studies conducted among Swedish residents (Tornstam, 1997). The expected correlation between life satisfaction and the level of gerotranscendence did not appear in studies conducted among Japanese people (Nakagawa, 2007). The relationship was also not confirmed by analyses conducted by Kavalier et al. (2015) in India. On the other hand, there are also numerous research results confirming that as the level of gerotranscendence increases, so does the level of life satisfaction. Examples include research conducted in Swe-



den among religious and non-religious Iranians living there, as well as among religious and non-religious residents of Turkey (Lewin, Thomas, 2001). Another example is the work by Wang (2011), in which a structural model of bio-psycho-social-spiritual factors influencing the development of gerotranscendence in elderly people in long-term care facilities was constructed on the basis of data collected in Taiwan. In the final model, life satisfaction, alongside meaning in life and social support, is a factor significantly related to gerotranscendence. Life satisfaction and religiosity proved to be significant correlates in subsequent studies in Taiwan (Ling Yu 2008, as cited in Tornstam, 2011). In Portugal, a comparative study was conducted of elderly clergy and consecrated persons (monks and nuns) and non-clergy (90% of whom were Roman Catholic). The analysis showed that the level of gerotranscendence and life satisfaction was higher in the first group. According to the authors, the results suggest that consecrated life may be more closely related to gerotranscendence than secular participation in a religious community (Abreu, Ribeiro, Araújo, 2023).

A longitudinal study was conducted in the Netherlands – four cycles of interviews with seniors every three years between 1995 and 2006 (Braam et al., 2016). The results did not confirm Tornstam's assumption that gerotranscendence develops with age, or at least that this is not the case in old age. The level of the analysed variable did not change significantly over time in the same individuals. However, the oldest respondents scored slightly higher. The authors of the study concluded that the historical period in which individuals lived and grew up may be significant. The Netherlands has been undergoing a process of secularisation since the 1950s, which may have had an impact on inhibiting the development of gerotranscendence in younger seniors. A higher level of gerotranscendence is predicted in this study by variables such as age, the importance of prayer, membership of the Roman Catholic Church, a low sense of control over the situation, higher cognitive abilities, and coping with humour.

A team of researchers from Japan (Gondo et al., 2013) obtained interesting results. Among other things, they showed that development towards gerotranscendence is a factor that protects against the negative impact of age-related changes in functioning on mental health. Research conducted among Polish and Czech seniors (Kozerska, 2025) showed a positive correlation between gerotranscendence in older people and the presence of meaning in life. Furthermore, gerotranscendence proved to be an intermediary variable between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning in life. It was shown that the presence of meaning in life not only promotes life satisfaction among older people but can also be the foundation for the development of spirituality (cosmic gerotranscendence), leading to greater openness to seeking new ways of understanding the world and new meaning. As far as research conducted on the Polish population is concerned, in addition to the said study, a number of articles pre-

senting the results of empirical research have appeared in recent years. These include, for example, an analysis of the determinants of marital satisfaction in late adulthood, which adopted the perspective of gerotranscendence theory (Brudek, Korulczyk, Ciuła, 2018). Another example is a study of the relationship between subjective health assessment and dimensions of psychosocial functioning in early and late adulthood, which refers to Torstam's theory in its interpretation (Brudek et al., 2019). In Poland, young and older women were also compared in terms of their level of gerotranscendence, and the determinants of this variable were analysed separately for each age group (Kozerska, 2021). The level of cosmic gerotranscendence was higher in older women. In both the younger and older women's groups, the level of the dependent variable increased in individuals who were actively seeking meaning in life and who were characterised by high levels of empathic wisdom and religiosity. In the group of younger women, experiencing difficult life situations in the last 6 months emerged as an additional predictor (this relationship did not emerge in older women). Research by Brudek et al. (2023) showed that forgiveness plays a mediating role in the relationship between gerotranscendence and wisdom in late adulthood. The results of Brudek, Krok, Steuden (2022) indicated that wisdom is an important element of the system of religious meanings and social support that people use as they mature towards gerotranscendence in order to cope with life's difficulties and challenges. An increase in gerotranscendence is associated with an increase in forgiveness and wisdom.

In Polish literature, the adaptation of the gerotranscendence scales (Brudek, 2018, 2021) is noteworthy. Several works of theoretical reflection have also appeared in Poland, including attempts to review selected scientific positions and attempts to evaluate the theory. These categories include, for example, the works of Jerzy Halicki (2006), Stanisława Steuden (2011), Marcin Muszyński (2016), Małgorzata Malec (2012), Maria Straś-Romanowska (2009, 2017), and Paweł Brudek (2016, 2017). Also noteworthy is the attempt to characterise wisdom as a variable resulting from changes arising from the process of gerotranscendence (Steuden, Brudek, Florczyk, 2016). However, I cannot find any description in Polish literature of attempts to use the potential of this theory in practice, in the process of institutional support for the development of older people.

## **Research tools used to study the course and signs of the gerotranscendence process**

Lars Tornstam has developed two scales to measure the course of the gerotranscendence process. The first is the Gerotranscendence Scale Type 1 (GST-1). The GST-1 scale allows us to capture the 'dynamics' of changes related to the

process of gerotranscendence. The second is the Gerotranscendence Scale Type 2 (GST-2), which comes in two versions: a longer one consisting of 25 items and a shorter one consisting of 10 items. The GST-2 scale allows for the identification of signs of gerotranscendence. The author of the Polish adaptation of Types 1 and 2 scales is Paweł Brudek (2018, 2021). As Brudek (2018) notes, the GST-1 and GST-2 scales are complementary, and each refers to different aspects of gerotranscendence, so each serves to formulate and solve different, separate research problems.

The GST-1 scale consists of 10 items. Examples of items in the Polish adaptation are (Brudek 2018, pp. 91, 92): *Today, I feel that the boundary between life and death is less clear than when I was 50; Today, I am less interested in superficial acquaintances.* The original version of the scale was constructed on the basis of the results of a qualitative study (Tornstam, 1997). On the basis of statistical analyses, two subscales were identified: Cosmic Transcendence and Ego Transcendence -. The GST-1 scale has been adapted and used in research in other countries as well, with a view to conducting cross-cultural studies in the future that would verify one of Tornstam's assumptions – the cultural independence of the process of gerotranscendence. Such research was conducted, for example, in the Netherlands among 556 adults aged 56-74 (Braam et al., 1998). It confirmed the existence of two dimensions (Cosmic Transcendence and Self Transcendence). It also showed, among other things, that the results are higher in the group of the oldest respondents (the changes perceived by the respondents are greater compared to when they were 50 years old). In Poland, 481 people aged 60-85 participated in such a study (Brudek, 2018). The results obtained were consistent with those obtained by Tornstam, confirming the two-factor structure of the tool.

## Debate with the creator of the gerotranscendence theory

Tornstam's belief in the universality of his theory is one of the subjects of scientific controversy in journals related to gerontology and related fields. According to Kristen Thorsen (1998), the gerotranscendence theory, like other theories of ageing, is constructed within a specific culture, and therefore its proponents should abandon the assumption of universality. The ageing process takes place in specific historical and cultural conditions and cannot therefore be considered in isolation from this context. Changing cultural ideas leave their mark on both the worldview of individuals and the way they perceive themselves. In fact, as Thorsen sees it, the phenomena observed by Tornstam are probably situated in a specific context that is conducive to their emergence. Therefore, they are not, *de facto*, exclusively related to the individual experience

of ageing, but the historical period in which a tendency towards transcendence emerged (perhaps not only among seniors) may also be significant here. Nor are we certain that this is not a cohort phenomenon (a specific generation characterised by the changes described). Moreover, Thorsen sees several inconsistencies in the reasoning of the author of the gerotranscendence theory. On the one hand, it is supposed to be a gradual, continuous process, but on the other, it is described as a transcendental and radical, 'sudden' change. On the one hand, a person developing towards gerotranscendence becomes more and more open and tolerant, and on the other, they reduce their contacts with other people to those closest to them. Finally, another objection raised by Thorsen is that Tornstam's 'spiritualisation' of older people results in a denial of their physicality and a marginalisation of the significance of gender. Yet there is no doubt, both on the basis of research and everyday observations, that old age varies according to gender.

Tornstam emphasises the need to move away from the dominant paradigm in gerontological research, arguing that previous studies have been 'tainted' by assumptions unconsciously accepted as obvious and requiring no proof by the researchers themselves. According to Donald Ebel (2000), this fact contributed to the theory being ignored by the scientific community for a long time. In his opinion, the theory was simply too confrontational, radical, and abstract for those involved in gerontology at the time it was developed. Another barrier to the acceptance of the theory was that in the 1990s, researchers focused mainly on health issues and the related biomedical model of successful ageing. The descriptive language, parallels and metaphors did not favour approval by the scientific community. Moreover, according to some critics (e.g. Hauge, 1998), the fundamental flaw of the theory is the lack of a clear definition of its most important concept (gerotranscendence). The definition presented by Tornstam is considered to be insufficiently precise. The reader is therefore forced to rely on a kind of intuitive understanding of the phenomenon described, which in turn may raise doubts about the scientific nature of the entire theory. Tornstam uses terms such as mysticism, meditation, and blurred boundaries between time and space. These are concepts that are foreign to representatives of Western culture, who consider them unscientific and difficult to understand in a logical sense (Hauge, 1998). For Solveig Hauge, it is also unclear whether, if transcendence is natural in old age, it is also natural in middle adulthood. If not, does this mean that Tornstam considers a materialistic attitude to be biologically more natural in middle age? After all, he claims that old age is qualitatively completely different from middle age. If it is true that we are more materialistic and rational in middle age, Hauge wonders, should this not apply to everyone, including those who live in the East?

Jewell (2014) points to the similarity between Tornstam's theory and E.H. Erikson's theory and wonders whether the former really offers any additional explanatory value. This raises the question of which theory's constructs are more useful for conducting research.

Another subject of controversy (Hauge, 1998) is the inconsistency between Tornstam's harsh criticism of the positivist paradigm in his scientific texts and the way he verifies his own theory (quantitative research). The author's fascination with Eastern philosophy and his use of concepts originating in this philosophy are also subject to criticism. Why doesn't he look for concepts in the main Western religion, Christianity? asks Hauge. He goes on to comment: "Perhaps many of the people in the West would have felt more familiar with Tornstam's ideas if he had based his theory on Christian philosophy". In Poland, similar suggestions were made by Paweł Brudek (2018) in an article describing the Polish adaptation of the Gerotranscendence Scale Type 1 (GST-1). In his research, he writes, he focused on a faithful translation of the scale, but he considers the adaptation of GST-1 using the theoretical background of Christian philosophy, which is closer to Poland in terms of mentality and culture, to be worth considering. According to Brudek, Straś-Romanowska's (2005) concept of quality of life, which takes into account the transcendent/spiritual dimension in the image of man, may be helpful in this regard. The subject of the research tool used to measure the variable of gerotranscendence is an important element of the debate. Jewell (2014) provides examples of publications in which the authors indicate that some items on Tornstam's scale were not understood by some of the respondents. This applies to the concepts of time and space, and the boundaries between life and death, which can be difficult to understand, especially for people with a low level of education.

## **The educational potential of the theory**

From the perspective of research on learning in late adulthood, it is important that the theory of gerotranscendence draws attention to the possibility of development even in people of very advanced age and regardless of their health and physical condition. As the author of the theory himself emphasises, development in this direction is characteristic of only a few:

Already from the first qualitative study it was obvious that gerotranscendence cannot be regarded as any uniform development which is the same for all ageing individuals. It is rather a developmental possibility, which can take different forms from individual to individual. Metaphorically, it may be that "the seed of gerotranscendence" is within us all, but needs proper watering to grow (Tornstam, 2005, p. 193).

Furthermore, what is important from the perspective of education research is that the process of gerotranscendence can be accelerated, but it can also be

inhibited or hindered (Tornstam, 2005). Intensification of development often occurs as a result of difficult life experiences. Inhibition, on the other hand, may be a consequence of prevailing cultural beliefs about old age. Tornstam (2005, p. 43) identifies many such inhibiting factors in Western culture. In his opinion, these include, among others, the prevailing belief in the value of activity, productivity, efficiency, independence, and sociability. Taking this view as an axiom, older adults may feel guilty about developmental changes that lead to other outcomes. It is also worth emphasising that we can talk about the graduality of development towards gerotranscendence, about different stages of this development (Tornstam 2011). In this context, Paweł Brudek's (2018, p. 14) observation that the changes that make up the process in question are rather potential in nature – they may or may not manifest themselves in everyone in old age – is noteworthy.

From the perspective of research on the education of older people, attention should be paid to the potential associated with the use of the assumptions of gerotranscendence theory to develop methods of supporting older people in various types of institutions involved in the care of seniors, or to promote ways of nurturing mental and spiritual health among older people. An example of research showing the possibilities in this area is the experiment conducted by the team of Wang, Lin, and Hsieh (2011). The results of this study suggest that supporting seniors using methods based on gerotranscendence theory has an impact on their mental health indicators. As a result of the experiment, the participants' life satisfaction improved significantly, symptoms of depression decreased, and the level of gerotranscendence increased. Wadensten (2010), on the other hand, uses qualitative research to show that implementing certain guidelines derived from gerotranscendence theory in the work of nurses in nursing homes could help to treat residents in a more individualised manner and could influence the quality of their ageing.

Some authors emphasise the particular importance of gerotranscendence theory in the process of supporting the oldest seniors (Gondo et al., 2013). In their opinion, support programmes based on Tornstam's theory have the advantage of being successfully applied even to people experiencing a significant decline in cognitive abilities. In some cases, it may be difficult to apply the Selective Optimisation with Compensation model (Baltes, Baltes, 1990), which requires rational management of internal and external resources, to such individuals. Furthermore, Gondo et al. (2013) point out the unique challenges faced by the oldest people, e.g., the increasing dependence on others daily assistance, and, the prospect of approaching death. According to the authors, these issues are easier to overcome by adopting a spiritual perspective than by using methods based on logical or strategic reasoning (Gondo et al. 2013).

The topic of gerotranscendence also appears in texts on dying and ageing as a tangible experience of human finitude. A review of the literature on this topic can be found in the article by Kellehear and Garrido (2023). Among other things, it shows that gerotranscendence can be a way for individuals to adapt to a situation in which they realise the inevitability of their own death. An example of educational activities related to supporting older people in developing a new perspective on life and death is the Psychoeducational Approach to Transcendence and Health (PATH) Programme. It was described by McCarthy et al. (2018). According to the authors, the PATH programme has the potential to be used in various places where older people meet, such as retirement communities, religious groups, adult day centres, and nursing homes.

A current review of experimental interventions conducted in various locations around the world, examining the impact of gerotranscendence-related interventions on the well-being of older adults, can be found in Abreu et al. (2023c). The results of this meta-analysis confirm the positive impact of the interventions on the mental health and life satisfaction of the participants.

## **Summary**

The gerotranscendence theory can be treated as a theoretical framework for developing strategies for the effective adaptation of individuals to the conditions associated with the ageing of the body. It is, of course, one of many proposals that have emerged in the field of educational gerontology (cf. Mollaei et al., 2025). What distinguishes this theory from others is its perception of ageing as an opportunity for existential development. It does not emphasise the deficits associated with the ageing process or the need to cope with them. The approach to ageing from the perspective of gerotranscendence theory does not focus on losses, but points to the possibilities of harmonious living in a situation where these losses are inevitable. Unlike the theories of activity (Havighurst, Albrecht, 1953) and withdrawal (Cumming, Henry, 1961), which emphasise social roles and place the individual as part of a system, gerotranscendence theory focuses on individual goals and internal development, strengthening human subjectivity.

Gerotranscendence appears to be a promising construct in research on successful/positive ageing (Carver, Buchanan 2016). A model of successful ageing that incorporates the theory discussed here would go beyond biomedical criteria, which some researchers consider discriminatory and perpetuating the misconception that illness and disability lead to 'unsuccessful' ageing. Viewing the ageing process from a spiritual perspective would make the model of successful ageing more inclusive. Furthermore, this model would be more consistent with older people's subjective understanding of successful ageing (Abreu et al., 2025).

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## **W poszukiwaniu możliwości rozwoju w okresie starości. Przypadek teorii gerotranscendencji**

### **Streszczenie**

Gerotranscendencja wydaje się być obiecującym konstruktem w badaniach nad pomyślnym/pozytywnym starzeniem się. Podejście do starzenia się z perspektywy teorii gerotranscendencji nie koncentruje się na stratach związanych z procesem starzenia się, ale wskazuje możliwości harmonijnego życia w sytuacji, gdy te straty są nieuniknione. Teoria może być atrakcyjna z perspektywy badań nad edukacją seniorów, ponieważ pokazuje możliwości rozwoju osób będących nawet w bardzo zaawansowanym wieku, słabym stanie zdrowia i kondycji fizycznej.

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie teorii gerotranscendencji Larsa Tornstama z perspektywy badacza zajmującego się uczeniem się w okresie późnej dorosłości. W tekście przedstawione zostały główne założenia teorii, jej geneza oraz krótki przegląd dotychczas prowadzonych badań nad gerotranscendencją, z uwzględnieniem badań prowadzonych na terenie Polski. Zidentyfikowano też obszary będące przedmiotem polemiki z autorem teorii gerotranscendencji w artykułach publikowanych w literaturze przedmiotu. W ostatniej części pokazano edukacyjne i praktyczne implikacje dotyczące omawianej teorii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** gerotranscendencja, uczenie się w późnej dorosłości, późna dorosłość.