Short Review

On Geropsychology in the Czech Republic

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Abstract. This work provides an overview of psychology of aging and old age in the Czech Republic. Historical roots as well as recent activities are listed including clinical practice, cognitive rehabilitation, research, and the teaching of geropsychology.

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With great respect we can read a 350-year-old text of Pampaedia on tasks for the last three stages of human life (Comenius, 1948) by Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670), who is generally known as the father of modern education. His importance was also recognized by the naming of a UNESCO award for outstanding achievements in the fields of education research and innovation after him, the Comenius Medal (1992); and a part of the EU’s Lifelong Learning Program – Comenius (“European Commission – Comenius: Europe in the Classroom”, n.d.). Among his theological and educational works we find a chapter of Pampaedia called “The School of Old Age.” While he never completely finished Pampaedia, we can still observe some of his thoughts regarding human mind in all stages through life, from infancy to death. He identified three “classes” of old age – three stages with regard to tasks of an old person: People at the doorstep of old age who look at their previous and future tasks; people who have entered ripe old age and hurry to finish all that remains; decrepit ones who await death. He set recommendations for tasks to aging well. Thus geropsychologists in the Czech lands can proudly trace the roots of the efforts to recognize challenges of old age and provide assistance in aging well to this phenomenal person.

The Czech tradition of considering old age as an important health-related topic was born in the 19th century when Prof. Josef Hamernik lectured on the specificity of the diseases of old age and included demonstrations with patients. Thus, a new geriatric clinic was unofficially started by him (Haskovcová, 2010, pp. 205–206, 227). After World War I, the first Clinic for the Diseases of Old Age was established by Prof. Rudolf Eiselt. It was the first institute of its kind in the world. Rudolf Eiselt closely cooperated with Prof. Ladislav Haskovec, a founder of the first neurological ward in Czech lands (Haskovcová, 2010, pp. 197, 206–207). It is interesting that their departments were situated in the Masaryk’s Homes in Prague, which was the name of a large complex consisting of houses for the old, almshouses, sanatoriums, and children’s sickhouses. The famous era of Masaryk’s Homes ended with World War II, during and after which the complex changed its name and purpose. It is now known as University Thomayer’s Hospital (Haskovcová, 2010, p. 199).
Geropsychology in Czech Textbooks

Despite the general gerontological traditions there was no organized effort to establish a Czech geropsychological platform or to reach a consensus regarding the teaching or training in geropsychological issues. Yet there were always some psychologists interested in aging here. They were not as many as one could find in other psychological fields, but they still produced remarkable written texts that are worth mentioning.

One of the unique textbooks on the bio-psycho-social questions of aging was written by Vaclav Prihoda (1974). His textbook was the fourth and the last of the whole series on ontogenesis. He offered insights into the questions of aging and also raised some for the reader to ponder on. Among such questions he raised, let us mention one in particular:

It does not seem logical enough that the law allows the destruction of hopeful life at its very beginning through artificial abortion – and at the same time forbids shortening tremendous suffering at its inevitable end (pp. 459).

It is an interesting fact that Vaclav Prihoda was originally a pedagogue, just like Jan Amos Comenius. He studied in the United States under John Dewey and Edward Thorndike.

There are many more Czech geropsychological resources, of course. Let us mention the most well-known ones: Psychology of Aging and Old Age by Josef Svancara (Svancara, 1983), The Way Through Life by Pavel Rican (Rican, 2006), Ontogenetic Psychology – Adulthood and Old Age by Marie Vagnerova (Vagnerova, 2007), the electronic text for students of Gerontopsychology by Nadezda Spatenkova (Spatenkova, 2009), Psychology of the Senior Age by Bela Hatlova (Hatlova, 2010) and The Old Age Phenomenon by Helena Haskovcova (Haskovcova, 2010).

Geropsychology as a Part of Clinical Psychology

In the 1950s geropsychological topics became a part of the newly established discipline of clinical psychology, following the first works on geriatrics. The first professional Czech publication on geropsychology is probably the work of Vladimir Vondracek and Jan Smec Psychology of Aging (1959). The authors defined the issues of geropsychology which are still important: changes accompanying the aging in the areas of perception, abilities, emotions, and personality traits, memory deficit, and role of intraindividual and interindividual differences. Jan Smec (born in 1928) joined the Psychiatric Clinic in 1953 as the first “official” clinical psychologist in the Czech Republic. He also contributed to the development of the subject of clinical psychology at the Faculty of Arts, the Charles University in Prague, where he has worked for more than 50 years. Prof. Vladimir Vondracek, MD (1895–1978), was a prominent psychiatrist, Head of the Psychiatric Clinic (University Psychiatric Department of the Charles University, Prague). He established Czech medical psychology as a discipline. Later, Vondracek continued in the field of geriatrics (Vondracek, 1964) while Smec developed the psychology of aging (1982).

There are 10 psychiatric hospitals in the Czech Republic that include geropsychiatric wards. Their psychologists cooperate more or less closely with the psychiatrists on diagnostic and therapeutic processes. Nevertheless, the care of older patients who are mostly hospitalized with cognitive disorders (dementia syndrome) is based on medication, and only the “enlightenment” of the medical staff and the professional charisma of their psychologists determine what psychological interventions are supported in the individual wards. Also there are many psychiatric clinics in general hospitals where gerono-geropsychological diagnostics is required of psychologists. Psychologists are also employed in sanatoriums for the long-term ill, in homes for seniors or in hospices either for diagnostics, therapy, or cognitive-stimulation programs. This varies according to the management of every institution.

A unique institution among the many that focus on providing care to the senior population is the Gerontological Center (GC) in Prague, which offers psychological consulting and diagnostics to the elderly with cognitive deficits as well as psychotherapeutic interventions and support for both patients and caregivers including caregivers who have already finished their caring because of the death of the patient. They also provide the training and supervision of professional caregivers in homes for seniors with dementia in the Czech Republic (Büchler, Jarolimova, Matlova, & Holmerova, 2010; Holmerova, Jarolimova, & Sucha, 2007). The center’s day clinic is used by patients with dementia and is popular for its excellent quality of care as well as its cognitive stimulation program. There is a small ward for the short-term care for patients with Alzheimer’s disease. Telephone consultation and other programs for the elderly population (dance therapy, computer skills learning, etc.) are much appreciated. GC is also a seat of the Czech Alzheimer Society and Alzheimer Foundation.

Some psychologists take part in the project “The Days of Memory,” which was initiated by the Czech Alzheimer Society in 2008 with the support of Pfizer Beaufour Ipsen and Lundbeck. The goal is to provide as many older people as possible a chance to undergo a screening for cognitive disorder, to be forwarded to specialist if needed, and to receive pharmacological treatment in case of a Alzheimer’s disease diagnosis (or a diagnosis of depression, etc.). This program for early diagnosis was positively received in the whole country, and there are now centers for memory testing in all the regions. Almost half of the people who come to have their memory checked are sent to these specialists (Matlova, Bartos, & Holmerova, 2009).

Family members and other careproviders for people
with dementia syndrome may find information and psychological support at the memory clinic of Tamara Tosnerova at the University Hospital Kralovske Vinohrady in Prague and through her website www.pecujici.cz ("pecujici" = careprovider). Tamara Tosnerova and a psychologist, Radvan Bahbouh, were among the first to study the psychometric parameters of Mini-Mental State in a Czech population (Tosnerova & Bahbouh, 1998).

Cognitive Rehabilitation and Cognitive Activation Programs

A growing domain for psychologists is the rehabilitation of various cognitive deficits associated with healthy and pathological aging. At present, the neuropsychological rehabilitation of cognitive functions is influenced by new technologies such as computer-assisted rehabilitation and diagnostic programs and virtual reality. In the Central Military Hospital in Prague, for example, psychologists successfully use a NEUROP 3 computer program developed by Laco Gaal (http://www.neurop.de), which creates special exercises for a concrete patient, in combination with "paper-and-pencil" as well as oral or nonverbal exercises. Training is conducted by a neuropsychologist or a trained staff under a neuropsychologist’s supervision. While in training, patients’ awareness and comprehension of the consequences of impairment is supported with relevant information. The proper feedback and information about the purpose of each of the exercises is conveyed. The training lasts several weeks or months or as needed (as soon as patient reaches the satisfactory level of functioning or has plateaued). Besides patients also their family members are motivated to be active and to keep on training in a home setting after they have finished the training program and to practice in a real environment and situation.

The general need to fulfill a demand for cognitive activities in a growing population of older persons – and following the French example – led to the founding of the first universities of the 3rd age (U3V) (sometimes called "universities of free time") just before the Czech Velvet Revolution at the end of 1980s. This important step to activate the senior population was a result of the great efforts on the part of an economist Dana Steinova, who persuaded Prof. Vladimir Pacovsky to support it (Haskocovova, 2010, p. 130). Today, all universities offer programs for older students in the form of U3V or some other program (the updated list of faculties offering such programs may be found at http://au3v.vutbr.cz/adesesar_2012-02-15.doc).

Dana Steinova is the most prominent person promoting cognitive training for older persons. She started the Czech Society for Memory Training and Brain Jogging (CSTPMJ), which received accreditation as a course of life-long learning from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The CSTPMJ has already prepared about 1,500 memory trainers who offer courses for community-dwelling citizens or clients from specialized institutions for less independent seniors (http://trenovaniapameti.cz). This is one of the few nationwide nongovernmental and non-clerical organizations to reach the older populations – and the only one to provide professional cognitive training of that scope. The number of memory trainers who are psychologists by profession is increasing each year as the reputation of the program grows in significance. Some memory-training initiatives have many followers such as a Brain Gym of the memory trainer Lenka Snajdlova (www.mozkoocvici.cz) or Mnémé by Jana Vejsadova (www.mneme.cz).

Psychologists often cooperate with NGOs, among which the Pamatovacék association ("rememberon") in Olomouc, Moravia, provides an outstanding example of generally beneficial activities aimed at the older generations, especially at people suffering from dementia – both patients and their caregivers (www.pamatovacek.cz).

Research on the Psychological Issues of Aging

Aging has become a scientific topic of research projects as well in institutions in the Czech Republic. For decades, older people and their changing mental abilities were examined by Jiri Hoskovec and Jiri Stikar especially in domain of traffic psychology and the psychology of organization and labor (1972, 2007). In 2006–2010, a project concentrating on the effectiveness of memory training in old people was realized in Prague Psychiatric Center (PCP), in cooperation with CSTPMJ. The results showed important subjective positive changes and limited objective improvements in episodic memory (Steinkova & Lukavsky, 2009, 2010). It also resulted in producing a Czech version of the Functional Activities Questionnaire (Bezdícek, Lukavsky, & Preis, 2011) and the Proactive Coping Inventory (Lukavsky, Solcova, & Preis, 2011). PCP and its psychologists also performed several other research projects on aging: Eva Dragomirecka participated in a large European project on quality of life in old age and is one of the authors of the WHO-QOL-OLD method (Dragomirecka et al., 2008). Hana Steinkova and Jiri Lukavsky, in close cooperation with Susanne Jaeggi and Martin Buschkeuhl of the University of Michigan (USA), in their common project found that older people are capable of improving their computer-based adaptive working memory training, and they found that the training had a positive effect on other working memory measures as well as on measures of fluid intelligence (results now in a review process). In 2009–2010, the Czech Technical University in Prague, Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Human-Computer Interaction Group, and the University of Hradec Kralove performed
Czech Geropsychology Today

Czech geropsychologists have contributed to the task force on psychology of aging since it was established after the EFPA congress in Wien in 2003. In 2010, a working group on geropsychology (WG-GP) of the Czech-Moravian Psychological Society was established based on the cooperation of experts from the Gerontological Center, Prague Psychiatric Center, and the University Hospital Motol in Prague. It was the first organized effort in the field. The main activities to date have been seminars or conferences focusing on an exchange of opinions, experience, and new information from the area of gerontological education, science, and clinical practice among psychologists working with the older generations as well as experts from other fields. The goal is to establish a platform for an efficient information exchange which would help professionals to improve their knowledge and skills, the final impact being an improvement of well-being of older people. The group developed and updated a list of recommended literature for people interested in geropsychology, which is available on the internet under http://cmps.ecn.cz/rl/geropsychology11.pdf. Among the founding members, let us name two honorable ones: Prof. Jaroslav Krivohlavý (born in 1925) and Dr. Jan Srnec. J. Krivohlavý, who survived a concentration camp during World War II, undoubtedly a terrible experience. Nevertheless, his works have concentrated on the positive sides of life, positive psychology, health, happiness, and wisdom (e.g., Krivohlavý, 2009, 2011). He still writes books for the general public, which are very popular. Jan Srnec, who has worked up to now as an academic teacher, has focused on geropsychological diagnostics (1994), the issue of responsibility for one’s own aging (Srnec, 2002a), and on factors of successful aging. He formulated the strategy of successful aging under the acronym ROSA: R = rationale, to understand one’s own aging, O = orientation toward the future, S = social contacts, and A = activity. He has participated in the popularization of such information (2002b) and in educational activities for the elderly. Another doyen of psychology is Jozef Kuric (born in 1926), who concentrates on developmental questions with special interest in psychology of aging (Kuric, 2001).

Besides the authors of this paper and those cited in the references who are all involved in geropsychology either as academics, clinicians, researchers, or students, we should not forget Dr. Jana Semberova of the Faculty of Health and Social Studies of South-Bohemian University in Ceske Budejovice. She works on the developmental psychology of aging, intergenerational solidarity, and the lifelong education and activation of senior citizens. She consistently promotes universities of the 3rd age.

The WG-GP has made a survey among the Czech universities, psychiatric hospitals, and private clinical psychologists. It became obvious that geropsychology does not belong to the regular mandatory subjects at any of the universities that offer full masters program in psychology.
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Declaration of conflicts of interest

The authors declare that no conflicts of interest exist.

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