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Woman's image in the menopausal period

Abstract:

Present studies on experiencing menopause by women emphasise the importance not only of hormonal and psychological variables but also of socio-cultural ones. This article presents the results of our research, whose aim was to analyse if and in what way age influences the image of a woman in her menopausal period. Forty women, ages 40-52, and 64 women, ages 20-35, participated in the research. Qualitative analysis indicates that age influences a woman's image during her menopause. The young women perceived menopause more negatively, stressing its physiology in this life phase. However, the women in the menopausal period had either a positive or a negative image of it. The women with a positive image associated menopause mainly with a natural life phase, as a full-fledged woman who knew her strengths.

Keywords: menopause, women in the menopausal period

Abstract:

W świetle aktualnych badań poświęconych zagadnieniu doświadczania przez kobiety okresu menopauzy, podkreśla się znaczenie nie tylko zmiennych hormonalnych i psychologicznych ale i społeczno-kulturowych. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki autorskich badań, których celem było ustalenie czy i w jakim zakresie wiek kobiet różnicuje treści obrazu kobiety w okresie menopauzy. W badaniu wzięło udział 40 kobiet w wieku od 40 r.ż. do 52 r.ż. i 64 kobiety w wieku od 20 r.ż. do 35 r.ż.

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Analiza jakościowa odpowiedzi zawartych w kwestionariuszu, pozwoliła ustalić, iż wiek kobiet różnicuje treści obrazu kobiety w okresie menopauzy. Młode kobiety spostrzegają menopauzę bardziej negatywnie, podkreślają fizjologiczny aspekt funkcjonowania kobiety w tym okresie życia. Natomiast wśród kobiet znajdujących się w okresie menopauzy istnieje zarówno pozytywny jak i negatywny obraz menopauzy. Kobietom charakteryzującym się pozytywnym obrazem słowo menopauza kojarzyło się przede wszystkim z kolejnym etapem w życiu, z wiekiem dojrzałym oraz z kobietą, która ma poczucie własnych kompetencji.

Keywords: menopauza, kobieta w okresie okołomenopauzalnym,

Introduction

The term “menopause²” (Greek for *men*-a month, *pansis*-cessation) is used to describe the phase of a woman’s life which is connected with the permanent cessation of the primary functions of the ovaries, and thus with changing from reproduction to non-reproduction and non-reversible loss of the ability to get pregnant and have children (Doucet G., Elia D., 1993, in: Borowska-Tokarska, 1997, 1998). Nowadays researchers more often perceive menopause as a natural phase of a woman’s life (Zollner YF., Acquadro C., Schaefer M., 2005, in: Bauld, Brown, 2009), which is connected with changes in social roles, in relations and marriages (Kuh D., Hardy R., Rodgers B., Wadsworth MEJ., 2002, in: Bih-Ching et al., 2005) and in bodily functioning. A significant role of these variables in experiencing menopause is highlighted by other researchers as well (Skrzypulec, Drosdzol, Frensowicz, Nowosielski, 2003; Lipińska A., Krogulski S., 2002). An interesting description of the roles of cultural, social, and psychological factors in experiencing menopause is proposed in the biopsychosocial model of procreation (Hunter M., 1994; Hunter M., Singer D., 2000, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2004). In this model biological factors (e.g. hormonal changes, poor health), cultural factors (e.g. beliefs, tradition, stereotypes) and psychological factors (e.g. previous experiences, mood, self-esteem) are responsible for the meaning which a woman assigns to menopause (ibidem). Moreover, this meaning determines individual emotional reactions and behaviour (e.g. searching for medical counselling) (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2004).

² In the literature there were also other terms used to describe menopause and that phase of a woman’s life when it appears. These terms are climacterium and climax, which are used equally and define a transitory phase of life from full sexual maturity to old age, covering a few years before and after menopause (Baron J., 1991; Coope J., 1997, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2006). According to WHO experts, because of its similarity to the term perimenopause, the term climacterium should not be used (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2006, p.301). This has been followed in the presented article.

Women in their menopausal period can experience a deep feeling of loss (e.g. loss of youth, physical attractiveness, their role as a mother), which can lead to the loss of one's sense of life (Glazer G., Zeller R., Delumba L. et al., 2002, in: Bauld, Brown, 2009). They often experience the fear of losing their femininity, which stems from a consciousness that menopause means the end of youth, female charm and sexual attractiveness. This state is often called *panic of the closing door* (Rausch J.L., 1993, in: Reroń, Huras, 2005). At the same time it is observed that menopause, even when treated as a part of development, is perceived negatively, especially by young people (Etaugh C., 1993, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2005). For example, American researchers have proved that menopause is treated negatively when presented as a medical problem, and less negatively when presented as a typical life phase (Gannon L., Ekstrom B., 1993, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2004).

Considering all the studies on menopause, it may be concluded that the attitude towards it can be influenced, in a way, typical for a particular society, by imagining menopause, which may strengthen either positive or negative attitudes (Bowles CL., 1990; Shoebridge A., Steed L., 1999, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2004). This thesis is supported by Bowles (ibidem), who claims that this how a woman experiences menopause and its symptoms: as a result of social attitudes and beliefs towards it. According to Bowles there are two levels of shaping experiences connected with menopause: socio-cultural and individual. The socio-cultural level presents an image typical for a particular culture presenting menopause either as a negative and unaccepted or as a positive and accepted phenomenon (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2005). The individual level is connected with a woman's personal attitude, both to menopause and to its social image (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2005). Bowles' conception proves that the attitudes and expectations connected to menopause in a particular culture are responsible for shaping women's individual attitudes, and in this way for experiencing this life phase and changes connected to it (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2005). According to her, the attitudes functioning in a culture have a significant role in experiencing menopause as a traumatic or natural, or even desirable phase of life. Also Berger (Berger G., 1999, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2005) claims that there are cultural beliefs connected with social roles, in ageing and functionings of the human body. These beliefs are transferred within the socialisation process: they shape individual experience and create a matrix of both perceiving and assessing menopause and reacting to it. Berger also claims that the most influential are attitudes towards ageing, for example losing physical attractiveness and strength, and a worsening health condition. Especially the attitude towards ageing and losing procreation abilities describes the social position

of women in the menopausal period, and also play an important role in developing attitudes towards menopause (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2005). In cultures where elderly people are socially respected, menopause is treated more positively, and more often women perceive it as a positive life event (*ibidem*).

A negative social attitude towards menopause significantly decreases the women's self-esteem in their menopausal period (Lachowsky M., 2002, in: Bih-Ching and et al., 2005) and contributes to developing somatic and psychological symptoms (Bertero C., 2003; Dennerstein L., 1996; Greene JG, 1998, in: Bih-Ching and oth., 2005). It has been proved that young women who claim that during menopause, women are unattractive more often experience intense menopausal symptoms (Bowels C., 1986; Rotem M., Kushnir T., Levine R., 2005, in: Bauld, Brown, 2009), especially depression (Hunter M., 2002, in: Bauld, Brown, 2009). Longitudinal studies have also proved this; they show that women with negative attitudes towards menopause (expecting intensive vasomotor symptoms – sweating and heat flashes) have more often intensified depressive symptoms. When women expected that menopause would be a positive /beneficial experience, they had weaker depressive symptoms and a smaller number of somatic symptoms (Bowels C., 1986; M., Kushnir T., Levine R., 2005, in: Bauld, Brown, 2009). Similar results were obtained by Avis, McKinlay, Matthews and others (1991), and Abraham, Llewellyn-Jones and Perz (1995), proving that the women with negative attitudes towards menopause experienced intensive menopausal symptoms (Avis, McKinlay, 1991; Abraham S., Llewellyn-Jones D., Perz J., 1995, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2005a). Also Orshan and others (2001) have proved that in forming opinions about menopause there are important variables such as: family attitude, psychological and psychosocial problems of a woman, and even the quality of health care (Boughton, 2008). Society, based on the belief that hormonal changes related to menopause are responsible for women's bad moods, continues to develop negative attitudes towards menopause (Newhall, Thompson, Thomas, 2001). It has to be emphasised that the common belief that menopause negatively influences women's psychosocial functions is a social myth. It turns out that it is not natural menopause that influences psychological states negatively, but stress connected with for example the death of a family member or with adult children becoming independent (Matthews and oth., 1990, in: Newhall, Thompson, Thomas, 2001).

Materials and Methods

The aim of the study was to establish what the image is of a woman in the menopausal period.

The research questions were the following: Is the age of a women an important factor in creating the image of a woman going through menopause? How important is it?

We used a questionnaire created for the goals of this study, which included the following questions:

What do you associate the word “menopause” with?

What are the characteristics of a woman going through menopause?

One hundred and four women were chosen using the snowball method, with 40 women age 40-52 in the perimenopausal period, and 64 women age 20-35 not in the perimenopausal period.

Results

Based on a qualitative analyse of the questionnaires filled in by the women age 20-35, a negative image of a woman going through menopause was created, as follows (Figure 1).

Women with a **negative image associate menopause** with biological functioning, for example with cessation of the period, hormonal changes and losing vitality. Moreover, they identified the word with cessation of reproduction and,

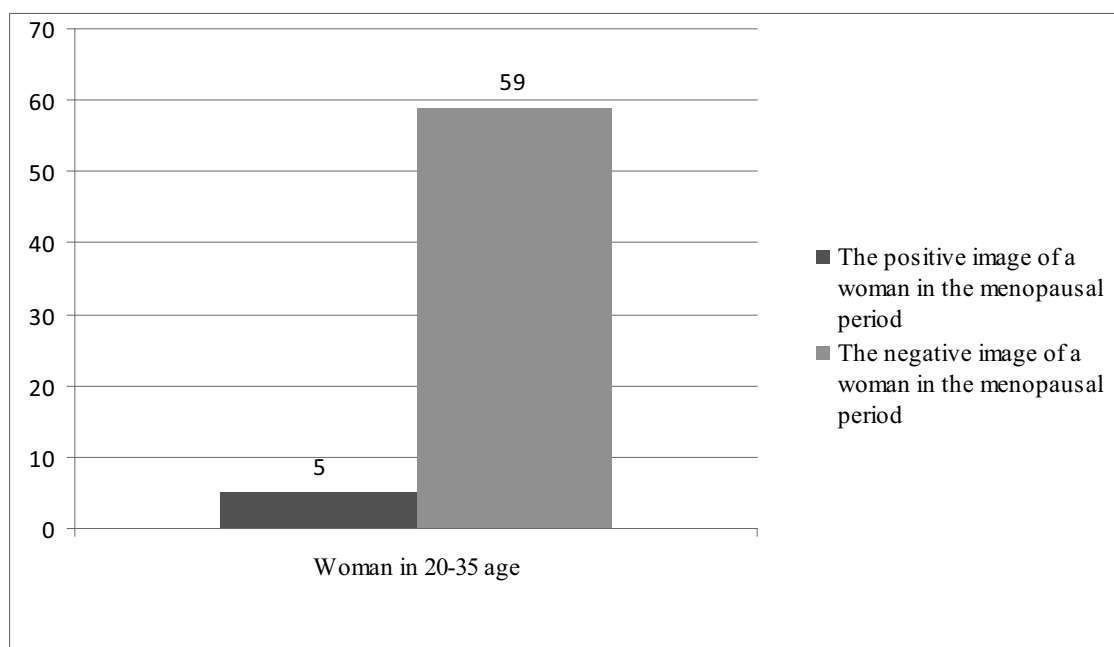


Figure 1. An analysis of the variable “the image of a woman in the menopausal period” for the group of women in the perimenopausal period.

Source: Own analysis

following it, losing physical attractiveness and experiencing a decline in sexual satisfaction.

This group of women believed that menopause would not bring anything new into their life. On the contrary, it was connected with generally worsening health as a result of physiological changes because of the lack of oestrogen. According to this group of women, a woman is aware of the fact that her youth has come to an end and that she has started her elderly phase and because of that her self-esteem decreases and the fear of death appears.

Ceasing to have a period for the women in this group means starting menopause and feeling physically unattractive; they also feel less feminine/womanish. They characterised a woman undergoing menopause as being an emotional liability, having depression, anxiety, tearfulness, irritation, abrasiveness, indecisiveness, a pessimistic world view, feeling lost, and feeling that she is not a “full” woman any more. They also had negative associations about physiological functions for example changes caused by less oestrogen (sweating, hot flashes, feeling dizzy, higher temperatures, and palpitations). The positive element was the lack of fear of getting pregnant and the lack of period pains.

An analysis of the women’s answers in the perimenopausal period, age 40-52, made it possible to distinguish two different images of a woman undergoing perimenopause: one positive (17 women) and the other negative (23 women). The following criteria were: type of associations (positive, negative) connected with

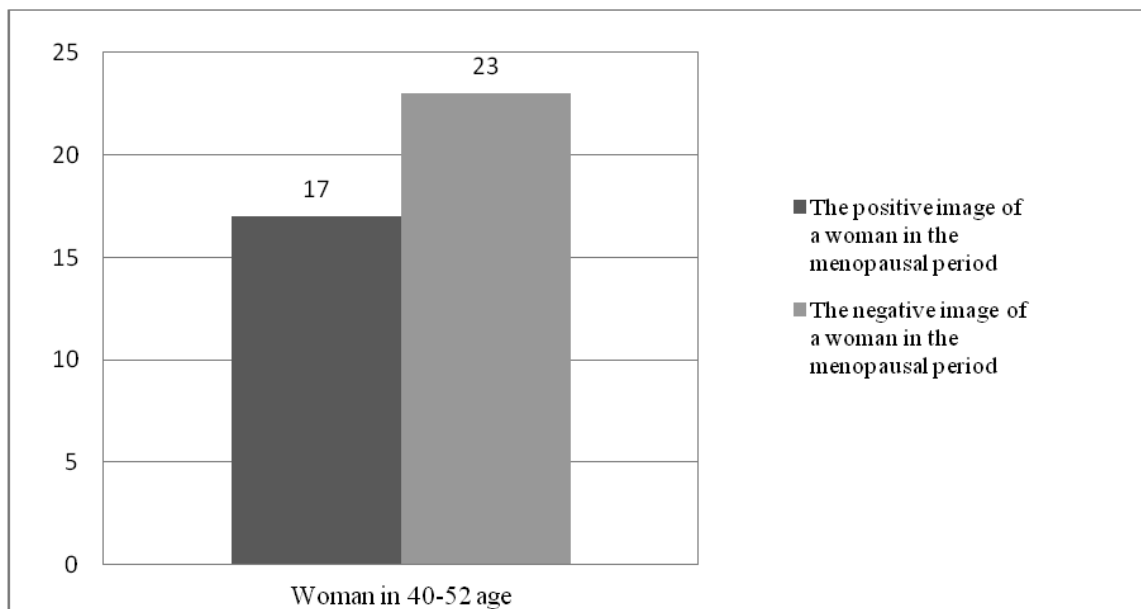


Figure 2. An analysis of the variable “the image of a woman in the menopausal period” for the group of women in the perimenopausal period.

Source: Own analysis

menopause, perceiving menopause as either a natural or unnatural phase in life, plus those qualities assigned to women in the menopausal period (Figure 2).

The women having a **positive attitude, associated menopause** with the next phase of life, treating it as a transitory state. They saw it as a phase in which a woman knows her own strengths and weaknesses, notwithstanding such physiological characteristics as: cessation of the period and hormonal changes. For this group of women menopause does not mean a new phase of life, bringing something new or important into their lives. They still feel young and attractive, are active in their professional and private lives, and take care of their well-being in spite of menopausal symptoms. They think it is not because of menopause, but because of their age, that they have developed a different attitude towards life, with more distance, summing up “their whole life” and planning things that still can be done. They do not feel that cessation of the period changes anything in their femininity. According to them, the characteristics of women going through menopause are: changing moods, hot flashes, easily getting tired, worse physical and psychological well-being and the necessity to get involved in problems of their adult children.

Positive associations were mostly connected to “flourishing again”, a slower pace of life, higher reflectiveness, experiencing inner peace, and psychological comfort.

Women with a **negative attitude, associated menopause** mainly with cessation of reproduction, ageing, losing femininity, cessation of the period and physical and psychological discomfort. According to this group, menopause is not connected with a new phase of life, it does not bring anything important or characteristic to their lives. It means lack of a period, a change in physiological functioning, physical symptoms (changing temperature, sleep disorders, mood disorders, tiredness, hyperactivity), and the end of an important phase of life. The women from this group identified menopause with lack of femininity and physical attractiveness, and they described a woman in the menopausal period as: more sensitive to external impulses, with emotional lability, suffering from insomnia, negatively assessing her appearance, and having low self-esteem. This group of women did not have any positive associations. The negative ones were connected with low self-esteem, worse physical and psychological well-being caused by the menopausal symptoms (sweating, hot flashes, insomnia, tiredness, lack of energy, emotional lability) and a generally worse health condition.

Discussion

The results show that age is an important factor of the woman's menopausal period image. Young women have generally a negative image of menopause. The women

in the perimenopausal period have either a positive or negative image. Moreover, the young women are not able to see anything positive in menopause. They associate it only with negative changes in the body, and following them: cessation of reproduction, femininity, physical attractiveness and the onset of ageing, which is connected with low self-esteem and the fear of death. The young women described menopausal women as displaying: emotional instability, depression, anxiety, tearfulness, irritation, abrasiveness, indecisiveness, having a pessimistic world view, feeling lost, and feeling that she is not a “full” woman any more.

The women in the menopausal period perceived it more optimistically and could see its benefits. They still felt young and attractive, were active in their professional and private lives and were trying to be fit and healthy, in spite of menopausal symptoms. They thought that it was not because of the menopause, but because of their age that they had developed a different attitude towards life, with more distance, summing up “their whole life” and planning things that still could be done. Moreover, this group of women claimed that cessation of their period did not change anything in their femininity, which they associated not with physical attractiveness and reproduction (features characteristic for young people), but with tenderness, sensitivity, gentleness and the ability to be a mother. Their positive associations were mainly connected with menopause as a time for reflection, and self-rediscovery. The young women almost did not have any positive associations. The only ones were physiological, such as lack of period pains and of fear of getting pregnant.

The results are consistent with other research (Martin E., 1987; Gannon L., Ekstrom B., 1993, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2003). Research conducted by Bielawska-Batorowicz (2003) points out that a coherent image of a menopausal woman consisted mainly of negative factors. At the same time the researcher points out that there were positive elements of this image. According to her, men and young people had a more negative image than women and elderly people did. She also points out that women associated menopause with ageing and illness, but connected it less often with generally negative features than men did. To explain this phenomenon we may claim that the closer the menopause is as a phase of life, the less dangerous it becomes, and so the less negatively it is perceived (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2003). For menopausal women their own age group seemed to be more diversified and that is why it is easier to attribute negative emotions and behaviours to external factors without connecting them with personality traits or physiological states (*ibidem*). The opposite tendency appears among young women, who had not experienced menopause. They treated women in the menopausal period as a not very diversified group and attributed its characteristics, especially the negative ones, to internal, less temporal factors (Bielawska-Batoro-

wicz, 2003). To explain this phenomenon we may also consider an attribution error, which causes attributing some constant traits to women in the menopausal period without considering their situation (ibidem). It can lead to underestimating the differences between members of one group and overestimating the differences between the two groups of women (Macrea CN., Stangor C., Hewstone, 1999, in: Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2003).

Considering the given results and other research, it can be claimed that a negative image of menopause can be an important factor influencing how one experiences it.

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