

## **Perception of the elderly by junior high school students and university students in Poland**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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**Introduction:** Statistical data from the turn of the 20th century shows a significant increase in the average human life span and, what follows, an extension of old age. The world is aging and Poland has joined the list of countries which have been classified as demographically old since the rate at which society is aging has become very fast.

**Purpose:** The aim of this thesis was to become familiar with the opinions submitted by respondents regarding aging and old age, health problems connected with aging and preferred health behaviors.

**Materials and methods:** The research was conducted between January 3rd of 2013 and February 15th of 2014 on a group of 200 junior high school students and 200 university students

from the Medical University of Białystok Faculty of Health Sciences using a questionnaire created by the authors.

**Results:** A vast majority of the respondents of the study groups declared that they have thought about old age. Among university students this percentage reached 38.5%. Almost 50.0% of all respondents acknowledged that older people are needed by society.

**Conclusions:** The results show that the aging process should be contemplated considering multiple aspects of life: biological, psychological and social. Moreover, youth education programs about seniors and old age as well as about ways to counteract their stigmatization should be introduced.

**Key words:** aging, social health, students

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## INTRODUCTION

Statistical data from the turn of the 20th century shows [1] a significant increase in the average human life span and, what follows, an extension of old age. The world is aging and Poland has joined the list of countries which have been classified as demographically old since the rate at which society is aging has become very fast.

Negative stereotypes of aging affect not only the senior citizens' experience of aging but also young people's perception of it, influencing their attitude to older people. It would seem that the negative perception of seniors is the basis of unsympathetic attitudes toward older people and discrimination against them, the so called ageism [2].

In obtaining key abilities the most important element is normal communication within a family, especially between the young generation and the elderly. Currently it is not only the old who teach the young but more and more we see the reverse when the older generation of mature people bring their problems to children [3]. Most often these are technical problems – a child teaches their grandparents how to use a computer, a cell phone or how to surf the Internet [3].

The main aim of this thesis was to become familiar with the opinions submitted by respondents regarding aging and old age, health problems connected with aging and preferred health behaviors.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted between January 3<sup>rd</sup> of 2013 and February 15 of 2014, after previously obtaining permission from the bioethics committee of the Medical University of Białystok (no. R-I-002/651/2012) as well as the consent of the headmaster of the Junior High School in Pozezdrze, the headmaster of the Mother of Divine Mercy Catholic Junior High School in Białystok and the dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences of the Medical University of Białystok on a group of 200 junior high school students and 200 university students from the Białystok Medical University, Faculty of Health Sciences.

The study used a questionnaire created by the authors concerning ascertaining the opinions about aging and old age as well as health problems connected with old age, comprising of two parts and in total containing 54 questions. The data obtained was compiled using Microsoft Excel 2010. Statistical analysis was completed by applying the Chi-square test and the proportion test with the Bonferroni correction.

Statistical hypotheses were verified at the  $p=0.05$  significance level. Calculations were completed using IBM® SPSS® Statistics program, version 20.0.

## RESULTS

Women dominated both study groups (71.2% of the study population). The junior high school group contained 56.0% of women and the university group – 86.5%.

During the analysis of the age of the respondents it turned out that over 35.0% of the questioned high school students were 14 years old ( $n=71$ ). Only two fewer people (34.5%) were a year older. Three quarters of the study population in the group of university students consisted of people between the ages of 21-25 (75.0%).

Analysis of the education level of respondents showed that 75 junior high school students (37.5%) were in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 72 people (36.0%) attended the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and 53 children (26.5%) were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of their schools. In case of the university students almost half of respondents (45.0%) were studying public health, 55 people (27.5%) physiotherapy, and 31 people (15.5%) nursing. Students of speech therapy with phono-audiology constituted 11.0% (22 people) of this sub-group. This group consisted predominantly of first-year students (61.0%), 18% were second-year students and the remaining 21.0% were students attending their third year. Over 60.0% of the participants were full time day students and the remaining (37.5%) were weekend and night students.

In the junior high school group, the largest percentage constituted residents of a major city while in the group from the Faculty of Health Studies of the Medical University of Białystok the majority came from the country.

A relatively even distribution of answers in both study groups has been recorded for the question "How does age relates to old age?". In the junior high school group the most common answer was "66-70 years old" (29.5%) while among the Medical University student it was "71-75 years old" (36%). The variance between the two groups was statistically significant ( $p<0.001$ ).

A vast majority of the respondents reported that they have thought about old age. The smallest percentage (39.0%) was recorded among junior high school students with only 1.0% fewer giving the opposite opinion. In the university student group, the same answer was given by 67.0% of respondents. The differences between groups were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Considering old age according to respondents

			Group		Total	p
			Junior High School Students	University Students		
Do you think about old age?	yes	n	78	134	212	< 0.001
		%	39.0%	67.0%	53.0%	
	no	n	76	43	119	
		%	38.0%	21.5%	29.8%	
	it's hard to say	n	46	23	69	
		%	23.0%	11.5%	17.3%	
Total		n	200	200	400	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Additionally respondents were asked whether they are afraid of old age. Almost half of the junior high school students questioned (49.5%) stated that they are not afraid of it. In the university student group this number reached 38.5%. Also, in this case the variance between the two groups was

statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The proportion test showed significant variance between junior high school students and university students ( $p < 0.05$ ). A detailed distribution of answers is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Fear of old age in the opinion of junior high school students and university students

			Group		Total	p
			Junior High School Students	University Students		
Are you afraid of old age?	yes	n	42	77	119	< 0.001
		%	21.0%	38.5%	29.8%	
	no	n	99	58	157	
		%	49.5%	29.0%	39.3%	
	it's hard to say	n	59	65	124	
		%	29.5%	32.5%	31.0%	
Total		n	200	200	400	
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

In answer to the question "Which opinion about the elderly is closest to your own views?" almost 50.0% of all participants admitted that old people are needed in society. In the junior high

school student group this percentage reached 45.5% while in the university student group it was 51.5%. The analyzed data has been presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Respondent opinion concerning the position of the elderly within society

			Group		Total
			Junior High School Students	University Students	
Which opinion about the elderly is closest to your own views?	the elderly rather are a burden to society	n	21	30	51
		%	10.5%	15.0%	12.8%
	the elderly are needed by society	n	91	103	194
		%	45.5%	51.5%	48.5%
	it's hard to say	n	88	67	155
		%	44.0%	33.5%	38.8%
Total		n	200	200	400
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

An even distribution of answers was recorded concerning respect shown to the elderly by members of society. Over 41.0% of all respondents were of the opinion that senior citizens are not respected by society, and a slightly lower number of

participants (40.5%) had a difficult time deciding whether older people are respected in society or not. The proportion test also did not find significant variance between individual groups. More detailed data is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Respondent opinion concerning respect shown the elderly in society

			Group		Total
			Junior High School Students	University Students	
Do you think that the elderly are respected in society?	yes	n	39	34	74
		%	19.5%	17.0%	18.5%
	no	n	78	87	165
		%	39.0%	43.5%	41.3%
	It's hard to say	n	83	79	162
		%	41.5%	39.5%	40.5%
Total		n	200	200	400
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Most junior high-school students (48.5%) and most university students (71.0%) were of the opinion that it is easier to go through

old age in the countries of Western Europe than in Poland. The answers to this question are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Respondents' answers to the question "Do you think that it is easier to go through old age in the countries of Western Europe than in Poland?"

			Group		Total
			Junior High School Students	University Students	
Do you think that it is easier to go through old age in the countries of Western Europe than in Poland?	yes	n	97	142	239
		%	48.5%	71.0%	59.8%
	no	n	30	7	37
		%	15.0%	3.5%	9.3%
	it's difficult to say	n	73	51	124
		%	36.5%	25.5%	31.0%
Totals		n	200	200	400
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In the junior high school group 51.0% would like to live with family as seniors while in the college student group this number is 48.0%. The differences presented between the groups were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

A vast majority of respondents from all study groups believed that the aging process should be contemplated considering all analyzed aspects: biological, psychological and social. During analysis of individual aspects respondents most often chose the biological aspect of life as the most significant (junior high school students – 29.5%, university students – 13.5%). The variance presented between the two groups was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Nearly ¾ of the respondents from the junior high school group (74.5%) during their course of study never discussed problems the elderly faced. The same percentage (74.5%) of university students did discuss these types of problems during their course of study. The variance presented between the groups was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The proportion test showed significant differences between the junior high school group and the university student group in respect to their "yes" and "no" answers ( $p < 0.05$ ).

In relation to the previous question only ¼ (25.0%) of junior high school students and almost half (49.0%) of university students believed that subjects connected with the problems facing the

elderly should be a part of the school curriculum. A large percentage of "it's difficult to say" answers has been recorded in respect to the posed question (junior high school – 48.0%, college students – 45.5%). The differences presented between the groups were statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). The proportion test showed significant variances between the junior high school group and the university student group in respect to their "yes" and "no" answers ( $p < 0.05$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

In many countries most recent decades are characterized by various forms of ageism which is visible through the discrimination and stigmatization of the elderly [4]. Jefferys [5] states that discrimination of the elderly is a result of their problems connected with adjusting to the fast pace of technological development and civilization changes which, in turn, are the reason that in many realms of life these people are not able to use the various forms of the modern lifestyle and become dependent on the young [5].

Ageism, according to Szukalski [6], can occur as:

- disdain – belief that the opinions, ideals and needs of the elderly are less important or less valuable;
- over-protectiveness (paternalism) – the inclination to relieve senior citizens in simple everyday chores even when they are able to perform them on their own;
- condescension – the inclination to treat the elderly as people who are not capable of surviving on their own without the help of other people or institutions;
- negligence – conscious or unconscious disregard for various needs which are very significant from the perspective of the elderly;
- social isolation – isolation of the elderly from the rest of society by restricting them to a closed area;
- financial abuses – various types of fraudulent activities connected with intentional taking advantage of the lack of knowledge and helplessness of senior citizens as consumers;
- physical abuse – physical aggression toward the elderly occurring in various forms (from shoving them to assault);
- extermination – intentional activities whose purpose is to shorten the life of the elderly [6].

According to Frąckiewicz [7] social exclusion of seniors can take on the following forms:

- lack of social ties;
- exclusion connected to cultural activity;
- exclusion connected to social participation and low electoral turnout;

- exclusion connected to lack of access to basic services such as medical services;
- exclusion connected with neighbors;
- exclusion connected to economic ability;
- exclusion connected to poverty [7].

Research conducted in November of 2009 by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) titled "Current problems and events" [8] revealed the opinions of Poles about the elderly including their attitude to their own old age. In answer to the question "Which opinion about the elderly, meaning those who are over 60 or are retired, is closest to your own views?" an overwhelming 87% of respondents chose the answer "The elderly are needed in society", 9% stated that "The elderly rather are a burden on society", and only 4% of participants marked the answer "It's hard to say"[8]. In our own research distribution of answers to this question was very similar. In all study groups the answer "The elderly are needed in society" was dominant.

In the analyzed study conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research of the group's 1022 respondents only 13% of them were certain that the elderly in Poland are respected in society and half of them had a reserved opinion on this subject (they are rather respected). Almost one third of participants (31%) did not perceive the respect given the elderly. In our study 41.3% of respondents were of the opinion that older people are not respected in society, while 40.5% chose the "It's hard to say" answer.

On the basis of the declarations of the respondents of the Center for Public Opinion Research study [8] it can be ascertained that currently 72% of them have considered their own old age and about a quarter of them (26.0%) state that for now they have not thought about old age. The youngest participants think about old age the least – nearly half of respondents between the ages of 18 to 24 have never considered this aspect of their life while almost the same amount of people over 65 do it very often [8]. In our own study 53% of participants has thought about their old age with the smallest percentage recorded among junior high school students at 39.0%.

Most respondents (56%) [9] of the 870 group of randomly sampled adult residents of Poland in looking back on their life noticed a positive influence of their grandfathers and grandmothers on their life. Most often the respondents claimed that it was thanks to their grandmothers and grandfathers that they felt loved (61%). Majority of them also declared that it was from their grandparents that they received the basis of their faith (59%) and moral values (58%). Grandfathers and grandmothers were also the source of family history (for 55% of all participants), discussion of some historical events (46%) and patriotism (49% learned to love their country from their grandparents) [9]. A

little over half of Poles (53%) claimed that they owe such personality traits as self-discipline, diligence, responsibility and strong will to their grandparents, while  $\frac{2}{5}$  (40%) stated that their grandparents taught them some practical skill. One-fifth (21%) felt that their grandparents initiated for them some type of a hobby or that inherited their interests. The number of participants who received an apartment (13%) from their grandparents or inherited something from them (7%) was lower. The large influence of grandparents on their grandchildren's life was the result of, among other things, the fact that nearly one half of adult Poles (47%) were cared for and looked after by their grandparents as children [9].

A different study [10] showed that nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of adult Poles (72%) felt that they owed something to their grandmother or grandfather. 16% claimed that they owe them nothing and 8% never met or do not remember their grandparents. In regards to the studies from years 2000 and 2007 a vast majority of respondents declared that they felt gratitude to their grandparents. However, the number of respondents who have had a different opinion on this subject as well as those who have never known their grandparents decreased. This confirms [10] an earlier opinion that the role of grandparents in Poland is growing, a fact most probably caused by the increase in the significance of their role in the process of raising grandchildren.

It seems therefore worthwhile to educate younger generations about aging and old age, about health problems connected with this stage of life, and to provide them with information concerning senior citizens, and to develop a strategy for the positive portrayal and perception of seniors as well as to break currently existing stereotypes concerning old age.

## CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the conducted research following conclusions have been formulated:

1. Respondents in general gauged negatively the life of seniors in Poland claiming that, for example, it is easier to live out old age in countries of Western Europe and that the elderly are not respected in society
2. The aging process should be contemplated considering multiple aspects of life: biological, psychological and social.
3. Youth education programs about seniors and old age as well as about ways to counteract their stigmatization should be introduced.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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