

Research Articles

Ageism and Negative Mental Tendencies in the Third AgeTeodor Gergov^{*a}, Ivanka Asenova^a^aSouth-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria.**Abstract**

Ageism is one of the global problems of contemporary world. This article is an attempt to look at it from a point of view of mentality. A few of the main manifestations of ageism including prejudice and openly demonstrated discrimination against seniors are discussed. On the basis of a survey, some conclusions are made about the negative consequences from ageism for the mentality of older people. The survey was conducted among 27 people between the ages of 20 - 35 and 36 people between the ages of 65 - 80 (mean age of 73.5 years).

Keywords: ageism, stereotypes, discrimination, mentality, seniors

Psychological Thought, 2012, Vol. 5(1), 69–74, doi:10.5964/psyct.v5i1.12

Received: 2012-03-22. Accepted: 2012-04-17. Published: 2012-05-31.

*Corresponding author at: teodor@swu.bg.



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

The term ageism was introduced in 1969 by the American gerontologist Butler to describe discrimination against seniors. In its essence ageism is a system of prejudice and negative attitudes to older people which also contains cognitive and affection processes (Petrova, 2008). These processes have most likely derived from the habit of younger people to see ageing and older age as an unpleasant and non- perspective stage of a human life and from the lack of information on the matter. Older age is seen as a period of growing deficiencies in all spheres of life – physiological, mental, social and financial. It is also commonly accepted that these deficiencies are universal and apply to all people. 'The traditional perspective forms beliefs and expectations about the third age that present it as an inescapable reality filled with a lot of fear and little hope' (Yolov, 1982, p. 5). Often, this perspective is due to unfamiliarity with the process of ageing and some emotional urge (Laidlaw, Power, Schmidt, & WHOQOL-OLD Group, 2007).

There are two main tendencies described as far as manifesting ageism is concerned. The first one has to do with the creating of stereotypical image of the older person which results in negative thoughts, feelings and actions against older people. What is typical about it is the use of inappropriate language and demeaning of seniors' achievements. The stereotypes are often built on incorrect information or mere myths. They represent a generalized image of the senior group and are often so strong that even indisputable scientific proof cannot overrule them. This fact provokes a subconscious emotional reaction to older people which sometimes takes the shape of disgust and desire to avoid their company. Stereotypes deprive individuals from their right to be perceived as unique with their positive and negative sides. Myths and stereotypes about older age are highly resistant in the conscious of the society, especially in Western civilization where patriarchal attitudes become weaker (Petrova, 2008).

It must be noted that stereotypes can be positive but when they regard the third age, this is not common (Petrova, 2008). In many societies, however, older people are respected and youngsters rely on their knowledge and advice. In social consciousness, the positive prototype of the senior is that of a wise, kind-hearted, patient individual who shows deep care for children, the future of the human race and the preservation of the spiritual and ethical values. This image is often manifested through showing good will, compassion and protection (Georgiev, 2003).

The second tendency through which ageism is demonstrated includes discrimination practices and institutional policies against older people. Most often seniors are discriminated on the labour market as they are considered to be incompetent, exhausted and unable. If they are hired, usually they have to do low qualifications job where they receive low payment.

The global tendency of an ageing population has turned senior citizens in a powerful factor of winning elections. Politicians try their best to win their vote in election campaigns (Tufan, 2010), and then quickly forget their pre-election promises. Older people are also seen by corporations as a huge part of their sales market. Marketing specialists and managers adjust their products to the interests and needs of seniors (Petrova, 2008). However they often think of older people as incompetent and try to sell them products of a quality worse than the claimed one. It is not uncommon for older people to become victims of different cults, crooks and aggression as other people find them helpless.

The consequences from the negative stereotypes about older age affect not only older people. Surveys have shown that people who in their younger years had negative attitudes and expectations for regressive changes in older age, had bad health in their senior years and a shorter life. What is even more, in some of its extreme forms, ageism can lead to gerontophobia (fear of aging and older people) (Ageism, 2010).

Method

The goal of this survey was to study the presently dominating society stereotypes about older people and how they influence older people's mentality. The survey was conducted among 27 people in the age between 20 and 35 and 36 people in the age of 65 to 80 (mean age of 73.5 years). The survey was conducted in two stages.

In the first stage, the younger participants were asked to describe their perception of older people. Each participant was given a questionnaire that included the following main categories: health condition; appearance; mental status and social-and-economic status. The participants had to write five entries under each of these categories to describe their thoughts and attitudes to older people. The questionnaires were processed to find out which the two most common answers were for each category.

In the second stage of the survey, the results from the first stage of the survey were offered to the attention of 36 people of the age between 65 and 80. They were all asked to get acquainted with results and comment on them focusing on the possible effects the result could have on their mentality. Does the negative image influence them? Do they agree with the characteristics of the negative image? Does this image generate negative thoughts/emotions and stress? Would it obstruct their everyday activities? In addition, all participants in the second stage were asked to share if they had ever been a victim of age discrimination and how discrimination had affected them.

Results and Discussion

After processing the questionnaires, the following results came out.

- **Health Condition:** sick; weak (exhausted).
- **Appearance:** negligent; wasted.
- **Mental Status:** conservative (rigid); having dementia.
- **Social-and-economical Status:** isolated (forgotten, lonely); poor.

For validation of the final results, they were compared to some similar surveys abroad and with older people's image that media had imposed (Kite & Johnson, 1988; Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005; Barrett & Cantwell, 2007; Mason, Darnell, & Prifti, 2010). The results showed a small overlap and sizable homogeneity of the already built stereotype.

Among the answers, there were some that implied a positive attitude: friendly, sociable, wise, nice, etc. In some of the interviews, certain ambivalence of the attitude was recognized. Older people were seen as both helpless and as obsessive nuisance.

The comments that the second group of interviewees made on the latter results were as expected of different character. As far as health condition and appearance were concerned, most of them (80.6%) agreed that losses in these respects were the biggest and most obvious ones for both them and society. Disease and physiological changes which inescapably affect appearance were accepted in a calmer manner as they were obviously considered inevitable and typical of that period of human life. In this sense, the characteristics of the stereotype image concerning health and appearance did not induce any extreme reactions in seniors. Older people stated that they were not greatly affected by people's opinion as they saw involution processes as something natural and unpreventable. As one of the interviewees jokingly said: "May all youngsters be healthy and live a long life so that they can experience for themselves what being at our age is really like"; in the same way another interviewee commented: "At least we are not at risk of infection with some of the typical for the younger generation illnesses." 11.1% of the interviewees openly stated that they felt living up to their age as a privilege. In a similar way, Beshkov wrote: "Of all ages of a human life, the old age is the most cherished and pleasant. It is the age most difficult to live to. At that age, you are respected without even having to have earned that respect - your infirmity and miserable looks do the trick for you" (as cited in Yakimov, 1998).

Of course, contrary opinions were also heard. Some of the interviewees, mainly women, shared their unwillingness and inability to get used to the image of a granny. One of them even confessed that she couldn't bear to look at herself in the mirror. Obviously, the self-concept these people have created for themselves through the years of their life conflicts their actual image. This conflict is the basis for a number of negative mental states which are reinforced whenever some feedback on the actual image is given. Thus, each cliché, suggestion or joke about age generates strong emotions and high level of mental distress.

As far as the comments on the mental status are concerned, they were characterized by certain protectionism and disagreement with the most common characteristics mentioned by the interviewees in the first group. Most of the interviewees in the second group (83.3%) believed they were mentally preserved individuals who still had a lot to give and receive. Although they were ready to admit they had some cognitive deficiencies, they did find most of their personal characteristics unchanged. Their preserved abilities were one of the arguments they put forward when they discussed this matter. Three of the interviewees were still active drivers but they said that they had more than once become victims of discrimination on the road. These situations provoked anxiety in their reactions and resulted in lower self-esteem.

The interviewees, however, were unanimous when it came to discussing the influence of discrimination practices in the job searching process after retirement. Many of them tried to find a job after they became pensioners, but often they were treated rudely and ignorantly. A bright example of this attitude is the failed attempt of an ex military officer to apply for a job as a security guard and the unsuccessful attempt of an ex kindergarten teacher with substantial experience to get a job in a day-care. What is common in these cases is the fact that despite the necessary qualifications and experience these people were not considered for the positions because of their age. Thus, [Petrova \(2008\)](#) points out that the judgment of the ability of older people to manage is strongly influenced by the stereotypes; seniors are expected to be slower and less adaptive. The common deception is that chronological age is a valid predictor for handling job responsibilities. A research has shown that when older people hear the stereotypes about their suggested incompetence and ineffectiveness, the parameters of their abilities and memory decline. Some personal characteristics assigned to senior citizens such as intellectual degradation and helplessness are also a result of negative attitudes towards them ([Fonseca, Gonsalves, & Martin, 2009](#)).

There is an interesting tendency of non-supportive family environment when it comes to older/retired people wanting a job. Some of the interviewees also confirmed that tendency with examples from their own families. When seniors see their work abilities and intentions evaluated as unnecessary and doomed to failure, they become sceptical about their future place in life. People in the third age perceive themselves as active individuals and this keeps the integrity of their personality intact. If seniors cease to believe in themselves and stop being active they subjectively stop to be. As [Spasovska \(1985\)](#) noted, work (labour activity) (organized in a family or other community environment) was a support mechanism for the individual after retirement. "In the unfavourable conditions of lack of activity and apathy, the unpleasant characteristics of an individual such as conservatism, over appreciation of the past, tendency to lecture the younger and complain, egocentrism, distrust and oversensitivity surface and become stronger" ([Granovska, 1989](#), p. 305).

Bearing in mind the possibility of such mental deformations, seniors have to put their deliberate efforts in the sustaining of a spiritual flexibility and overcoming rigidity. Rigid views seem to be the reason why older people are often victims of attempts for fraud. Some of the interviews shared that only their well-preserved, precise judgment and increased alertness had helped them avoid becoming victims of fraud. The very fact that they have successfully managed in such situations is at the same time a catalyst of negative stereotypes and a source of mental support. What supports seniors' mentality even more is the expression of positive impressions and opinions. As [Georgiev \(2003\)](#) commented, aging individuals grew old with the assumption that their personality was preserved and they expected from others to actively support their belief.

This probably explains why the answers of the first group of interviewees about the social-and-economic status of senior citizens received the most emotional comments from the second group of interviewees. A very big part of them (75%) said without even trying to pretend that they felt poor and lonely but the mentioning of this fact by third parties induced painful feelings in them. These feelings were related to their fears and anxiety about the future. Some of the interviewees believed it was their own fault that they are in such a situation. Others blamed politicians, their children or ex- spouses, etc. The expression 'They did this to us' was often used, and each interviewee had different meaning and contents to put in "they". Seniors found the state policy regarding older population offensive. The low pensions, the prices of the drugs, the bad level of health service, etc., all contribute to older people feeling unworthy and being discriminated. The prejudices we demonstrate to older people affect

these people's activity in the process of socialization and future planning negatively as prejudice makes them believe their efforts are useless (Gradev, 1987).

Disincentive influence is extremely dangerous as it leads to isolation of the individual. As one of the interviewees said: "I don't want to live any longer. I live alone. My children live abroad and only visit me once in a few years. My pension is 180 levs and I am hardly making the ends meet. I have nothing to live for".

The numerous coming across a stereotype that tells them they are unable and useless, can make older people believe they are dependent and inferior. They may start to see themselves from the point of view of their mirror image and the others. When this is the case (Petrova, 2008), the stereotypes turn into fulfilled prophecies. Although there is not a firm opinion about the change in the self-esteem that comes with the growing of age, it is widely accepted that it is determined by the attitudes of the others - family, society, etc. Both self-esteem and confidence are essential for the social function and the attitude towards the surrounding environment. Thus, when seniors are the focus of attention and appreciation, their self-esteem grows and they show more respect and better predisposition to people from younger generations. On the contrary, if they become the object of a negative attitude, they become defensive, distrustful and sceptical (Coudin & Alexopoulo, 2010). Negative attitudes also deteriorate the self-esteem and adaptation processes of senior citizens as they have to adjust not only to the new situations and realities but also to their new selves and the prejudice of the society.

Conclusion

The cumulating effect of prejudicial and discriminative attitude to older people manifests itself in negative tendencies in their entire mentality and behaviour. These tendencies are very strong as far as motivation, mental welfare, goal-setting, self-concept and emotional sphere are concerned. Older age is evaluated and experienced through the prism of the dominating social prejudice whose attitude and narrow-mindedness often become the basis for the building of a wrong strategy and attitude to the self and the others. Many seniors start to believe the stereotype which leads to the lowering of their own self-esteem as they afraid that their behaviour might prove the stereotype right. Their own self-image in most of the cases blocks their actual abilities and determines their further mental development as negative. Moreover, some seniors might start a process of stereotyping themselves which will multiply the effect of the actual stereotypes.

People in an older age are different and therefore they should not be seen a homogenous group. Many of them have problems overcoming the deeply-rooted stereotypes and discriminative attitude on their own. Thus, efforts to help them should be made by both society and state institutions. Seniors need understanding and support when solving their problems. After all, it is the attitude of the society to older people that shows how mature a nation is.

References

- Ageism. (2010). Retrieved in March 2012, from <http://www.referati.org/eidjizym-ageism-/52172/ref>
- Barrett, A. E., & Cantwell, L. E. (2007). Drawing on stereotypes: Using undergraduates' sketches of elders as a teaching tool. *Educational Gerontology*, 33(4), 327-348. doi:10.1080/03601270701198950
- Coudin, G., & Alexopoulo, T. (2010). „Help me! I'm old!" How negative aging stereotypes create dependency among older adults. *Aging & Mental Health*, 14(5), 516-523. doi:10.1080/13607861003713182

- Fonseca, A., Gonsalves, D., & Martin, I. (2009). Changing attitudes towards ageing and the aged amongst psychology students. *European Journal of Education, 44*(3), 455-466. doi:10.1111/j.1465-3435.2009.01396.x
- Georgiev, L. (2003). *Psihologiâ na vazrastnite* [Psychology of elderly people]. Blagoevgrad: ŪZU "Neofit Rilski".
- Gradev, D. (1987). *Sabitiâtâ v žizneniâ pat na ličnostta* [Events in the life way of the personality]. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo.
- Granovska, R. (1989). *Elementi na praktičeskata psihologiâ* [Some elements of the practical psychology]. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo.
- Kite, M. E., & Johnson, B. T. (1988). Attitudes toward older and younger adults: A meta-analysis. *Psychology and Aging, 3*, 233-244. doi:10.1037/0882-7974.3.3.233
- Kite, M. E., Stockdale, G. D., Whitley, B. E., Jr, & Johnson, B. T. (2005). Attitudes toward younger and older adults: An updated meta-analytic review. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*, 241-266. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00404.x
- Laidlaw, K., Power, M. J., Schmidt, S., & WHOQOL-OLD Group. (2007). The attitudes to ageing questionnaire (AAQ): development and psychometric properties. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 22*(4), 367-379. doi:10.1002/gps.1683
- Mason, S., Darnell, E., & Prifti, P. (2010). Stereotypes and representations of aging in the media. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 37*(2), 189-190.
- Petrova, D. (2008). Ejdzizmat sašnost, obâsnitelni modeli i efekti [Ageism – nature, explanatory models, and effects]. *Balgarsko spisanie po psihologiâ, 391-397*.
- Spasovska, L. (1985). *Pokoleniâ i semejstvo* [Generations and family]. Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Otečestveniâ front.
- Tufan, I. (2010). Institutional authority and traces of intergenerational conflict. *Educational Gerontology, 36*, 676-686.
- Yakimov, A. (1998). *Fiziognomiâ: Kakvo kazva čoveškata fizika za čoveškata duša* [Physiognomy: What does human physique says about human soul]. Sofia: Miriam.
- Yolov, G. (1982). *Tretata vazrast* [The third age]. Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo.

About the Authors

PhD student **Teodor Gergov** is an assistant at the Department of Psychology of South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. His scientific interests are in the areas of Developmental Psychology, Evolutionary Psychology, and Gerontopsychology.

Assoc. Prof. **Ivanka Asenova**, PhD is a lecturer at the Department of Psychology of South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. Her scientific interests are in the area of Neuropsychology.