

Ageist Stereotypes in Adolescents Living with an Elderly Person

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ABSTRACT

Ageism in modern society seems to be internalized in childhood and reinforced in adolescence. The aim of the research was to show the stereotyping of the elderly among adolescents, based on a foreign survey questionnaire adapted to the cultural specifics of Slovenian adolescents. We performed a bivariate analysis on a sample of 188 students in the Slovenian Savinja statistical region and found that ageist stereotyping among adolescents is related to their joint household with an elderly person. The negative attitude towards the elderly could be improved among adolescents through formal and informal education about age and aging in an intergenerational environment which also includes the family.

Keywords

Ageist stereotypes, Adolescent, Elderly person, Joint household.

Introduction

In 2021, more than one fifth (20.8 %) of the EU population was aged 65 and over, and projections indicate that the share of people over 65 could reach 30 % of the EU population by 2030 [1]. This demographic phenomenon is also reflected in the emergence of ageism. Ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against the elderly based on their age [2,3]. Despite the fact that old age can be healthy and productive, discrimination against the elderly is present in modern societies, including Slovenian ones [4]. Eržen and Bilban (2008) point out that the political and media discourses most often accentuate the costs associated with an aging population [5]. Such messages contribute greatly to negative social perceptions of aging and the elderly and influence people's attitudes towards old age and aging. Rožanova (2010) notes that older people are still underrepresented in the media; Vickers (2007), too, observes that most people in the media are young and energetic [6,7].

Ageism can be internalized already in adolescence. In various researches, which specifically referred to adolescents of different ages, genders, educational levels, socio-economic backgrounds, knowledge about aging and experiences with the elderly, it was found that adolescents have different attitudes towards the elderly

[8-15]. Results of Davidovic, et al (2007) indicate that majority of children have positive perception and attitude about old age, and they concluded that ageism is adopted later in life [8]. By reviewing the literature, Bodner (2009) found that among young adults, the reason for ageism is an unconscious defense strategy against the fear of death, and that a dissociation of the linkage between death and old age in young adults can be achieved by changing the concepts of death and aging [9]. Even if in the modern era the space for the elderly in the family is narrowing, multigenerational families still exist. Although there is a significant relationship between the degree of ageism and parenting styles in the family, very little attention has been given to the issue of ageism and age discrimination in families [10,11]. On the other hand, positive stereotypes and customs for the elderly may also exist in the family, when we talk to them like children, which can reduce self-esteem of the elderly [12].

However, we must not neglect the importance of language in digital media in the spread of ageism among young people. Gendron et al (2016) conducted a qualitative study of a twitter assignment for 236 health professional students who partnered teams with an older adult living in the community [13]. Twelve percent of the tweets were found to contain discriminatory language with 8 broad themes describing language-based age discrimination: assumptions and judgments, older people as

different, uncharacteristic characteristics, old as negative, young as positive, infantilization, internalized ageism, and internalized microaggression. This demonstrates that ageistic language is so engrained in our day-to-day world that it is nearly invisible [13].

Meshel and McGlynn (2004) demonstrated an improvement in attitudes towards elderly people in a sample of adolescents following a program that combined the generations for positive contact in educational activities [14].

In the following, we present the results of a survey on the attitude of adolescents to elderly people. The main research question concerns the identification of aspects of this relationship that lead to ageism. Furthermore, we were interested in whether there are statistically significant differences in the expressed attitudes regarding cohabitation in a household with an elderly person or not.

In order to check students' attitudes towards older people, we investigated two groups of students according to whether or not they live in a household with an elderly person. First of all, the study wanted to check whether the groups even knew about terminus ageism. In addition, we wanted to find out whether there is an ageist negative attitude towards the elderly in the groups and to what extent it is present.

Method

Participants

The research sample included students from two secondary schools in Slovenian Savinja region. Thus, in the period from 31/03/2022 to 27/05/2022, we sent the questionnaire to students of the Secondary Vocational and Professional School (SVPS) of the Šentjur School Center and 400 students of the Celje - Center High School (CCHS).

Data collection method

We used a questionnaire prepared on the basis of a questionnaire by Marchetti and colleagues (2022), which contains 33 statements concerning the elderly's mood, traditionalism, physical frailty, his attitude to technology, wisdom and sociability [15]. Given the cultural characteristics of the Slovenian nation, we were able to combine the statements in the field of the elderly's mood and wisdom into one statement, therefore the present structured online questionnaire contains 31 statements about the elderly. Based on 31 statements about the attitude towards the elderly, we also calculated the reliability of the questionnaire, which is excellent (Cronbach's alpha is 0.875).

Ethical consideration

On 16 March 2022, the application, No. 0120-610/2021/10 for the assessment of the ethical adequacy of the research, the Commission of the Republic of Slovenia for Medical Ethics assessed it as ethically acceptable and issued consent for the conduct of the research. In conducting the research, the researchers followed the ethical guidelines on non-experimental research and survey was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data analysis

The results were presented in the form of frequencies and percentages, in the bivariate analysis we used only non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U test, chi-square test, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient), because the distribution of the variables deviates from the normal. When the assumptions for performing the chi-square test are not fulfilled, we used the Kullback $2\hat{I}$ -test (Likelihood ratio) instead of the chi square statistic. We compiled the common variables by dimensions in such a way that we summed up the individual statements of the set, and in the event that there are negative and positive statements in the set, we recoded the positive statements before summing. SPSS (version 23.0) was used for statistical analysis. Differences with $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.

Sample information

The basic sample is made up of students from two Slovenian secondary schools. A survey was sent to 400 students at CCHS, and to 139 students in SVPS. During the survey, we recorded 221 respondents who entered the survey. 18 respondents completed the survey inappropriately, and 203 respondents completed the survey appropriately, subsequently we excluded another 15 respondents due to the inappropriate target age, so that there are 188 respondents in the final sample. The response rate in relation to the size sample ($n = 188$) of the target population ($n = 539$) of both schools is 34.9%, and is adequate in relation to the size of population.

Results

When analyzing the results, we should not overlook the fact that the research took place at the end of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic, which could have influenced the lower response of students. The sample consisted of 188 students. The average age of the respondents was 16.9 years (15 – 19 years of age; SD 1.37). CCHS students represented 63.8% ($n = 120$) and SVPS students 36.2% ($n = 68$) of the sample. Female students represented 89.4% ($n = 168$) of the sample, and students with permanent residence in rural areas represented 78.2% ($n = 147$) of the sample. 94.7% ($n = 178$) of students have elderly relatives, of which 96.6% ($n = 172$) are grandparents, and 31.9% ($n = 60$) of the surveyed students live in the joint household with elderly relatives. 93.6% ($n = 176$) of students mean that elderly person is person older than 65 years, and 77.7% ($n = 147$) of them had seen a negative attitude towards the elderly.

The results are presented in two parts. In the first part, we determined familiarity with the term ageism with various demographic variables. In the second part, we examined the attitude of the respondents towards the elderly according to the individual stereotypical claims of all groups, in relation to joint or separate households.

Knowledge of ageism with various demographic variables

Table 1 shows that only 35 individuals or 18.6% of all respondents stated that they know the concept of ageism. The analysis of the

relationship between knowledge of the concept of ageism and socio-demographic variables showed that among individuals who do not have an elderly relative, no one knows this concept ($p=0.039$). 56.4 % of respondents ($n = 106$) are not interested in ageism at all.

Likewise, knowledge of the term is noticeably higher among respondents who live in a joint household with an elderly person (26.7%) than among those who do not live in such a household (14.8%); in this case, it is a borderline statistically significant association between the variables ($p=0.052$). A slightly higher proportion of individuals who stated that they know the term is among the students of the SVPS (25.0%) than among the students of the CCHS (15.0%), but in this case the connection between the variables is not statistically significant ($p=0.091$).

As can be seen in table 2, according to the results of the bivariate comparison, the attitude towards the elderly in several areas is related to the fact whether or not the respondents live with an elderly person in a joint household. An overview of all statements concerning the respondents' attitudes towards the elderly were collected in six content-grouped sets, which include statements about the elderly: mood, traditionalism, physical frailty, attitude to technology, wisdom and sociability. The statements in two sets (wisdom and sociability) are associated with more positive attitude of students towards the elderly than in remaining four sets (mood, traditionalism, frailty and attitude to technology). Furthermore, among these four sets, we found two (mood and traditionalism) where some of the statements of the respondents who live with

an elderly person are statistically significantly different from those who do not live with an elderly person in the joint household. We tested the connection between the assessment of the elderly's mood, namely by summing all 4 evaluations of the statement into a common variable that has a range of values from 4 to 12, where a higher score means a more negative attitude towards the elderly's mood. Those students who live together with an elderly person stated to a greater extent that the elderly are irritable ($p=0.036$) and tired and fluid ($p=0.015$). We also tested the correlation of the assessment of the traditionalism of the elderly with socio-demographic variables, namely, first of all, we added all 11 evaluated statements into a common variable, which has a range of values from 11 to 33, with a higher score indicating a more negative assessment of the traditionalism of the elderly. Compared to the rest of the respondents, those respondents who live in a joint household with an elderly person are convinced in a statistically higher proportion that they like to criticize ($p=0.045$). Furthermore, a similar, moderately negative perception of the traditionalism of the elderly prevails among all respondents.

Discussion

In the research, we wanted to find out whether in Slovenian postmodern society adolescents know the term ageism. The main goal of the research was to examine aspects of the relationship between adolescents and the elderly. We focused on the high school population and the research sample included 188 young people aged 15 to 19 ($M = 16.9$; $SD = 1.37$). Further, we focused in more detail mainly on negative stereotypes that lead to ageism. We were also interested in whether or not there were statistically

Table 1: Knowledge of the term ageism and demographic comparisons (chi-square test).

		Do you know what ageism is? (n=188)					
		Yes		No		chi square or Likelihood ratio	p value
		f	f %	f	f %		
Gender	Male	6	30.0%	14	70.0%	1.714	0.190
	Female	29	17.3%	139	82.7%		
	Total	35	18.6%	153	81.4%		
How old are you?	Younger students (15-17 years old)	20	18.3%	89	81.7%	0.012	0.912
	Older students (18-19 years old)	15	19.0%	64	81.0%		
	Total	35	18.6%	153	81.4%		
Your permanent residence is	In rural areas	29	19.7%	118	80.3%	0.549	0.459
	In urban areas	6	14.6%	35	85.4%		
	Total	35	18.6%	153	81.4%		
Which school do you attend?	GCC	18	15.0%	102	85.0%	2.865	0.091
	SVPS	17	25.0%	51	75.0%		
	Total	35	18.6%	153	81.4%		
Do you have an elderly relative?	Yes	35	19.7%	143	80.3%	4.247	0.039*
	No	0	0.0%	10	100.0%		
	Total	35	18.6%	153	81.4%		
Do you live in a joint household with an elderly person?	Yes	16	26.7%	44	73.3%	3.769	0.052
	No	19	14.8%	109	85.2%		
	Total	35	18.6%	153	81.4%		

*Association between variables is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Note: CCHS: Celje - Center High School; SVPS: Secondary Vocational and Professional School of the Šentjur School Center.

The attitude of the respondents towards the elderly.

Table 2: Attitude towards the elderly and joint household with an elderly person (chi square test).

N=188	Stereotypes about the elderly	Do you live in a joint household with an elderly person?												Hi square or Likelihood ratio	p value
		Yes (n=60)						No (n=128)							
		I don't agree		I neither agree nor disagree		I agree		I don't agree		I neither agree nor disagree		I agree			
		f	f %	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %	f	f %		
Mood	They are irritable.	6	10.0%	33	55.0%	21	35.0%	23	18.0%	81	63.3%	24	18.8%	6.650	0.036*
	They keep complaining.	13	21.7%	29	48.3%	18	30.0%	44	34.4%	59	46.1%	25	19.5%	4.177	0.124
	They are strenuous and fluid.	23	38.3%	27	45.0%	10	16.7%	71	55.5%	50	39.1%	7	5.5%	8.415	0.015*
	They get angry quickly.	24	40.0%	20	33.3%	16	26.7%	50	39.1%	55	43.0%	23	18.0%	2.45	0.294
Traditionalism	They cannot accept change.	10	16.7%	27	45.0%	23	38.3%	31	24.2%	56	43.8%	41	32.0%	1.559	0.459
	They don't think big.	13	21.7%	26	43.3%	21	35.0%	49	38.3%	49	38.3%	30	23.4%	5.694	0.058
	They don't understand young people.	11	18.3%	26	43.3%	23	38.3%	34	26.6%	57	44.5%	37	28.9%	2.307	0.316
	They interfere in the lives of young people.	11	18.3%	25	41.7%	24	40.0%	39	30.5%	50	39.1%	39	30.5%	3.439	0.179
	They like to criticize.	7	11.7%	17	28.3%	36	60.0%	24	18.8%	52	40.6%	52	40.6%	6.201	0.045*
	They are not interested in the entertainment and cultural life of young people.	21	35.0%	26	43.3%	13	21.7%	47	36.7%	51	39.8%	30	23.4%	0.211	0.900
	They don't trust young people.	23	38.3%	23	38.3%	14	23.3%	57	44.5%	53	41.4%	18	14.1%	2.527	0.283
	They are too connected to the past.	9	15.0%	26	43.3%	25	41.7%	22	17.2%	52	40.6%	54	42.2%	0.193	0.908
	They understand modern life.	17	28.3%	34	56.7%	9	15.0%	40	31.3%	73	57.0%	15	11.7%	0.46	0.794
	They keep up with the times.	20	33.3%	31	51.7%	9	15.0%	36	28.1%	68	53.1%	24	18.8%	0.716	0.699
They accept innovations.	15	25.0%	29	48.3%	16	26.7%	20	15.6%	79	61.7%	29	22.7%	3.477	0.176	
Frailty	They are hard of hearing.	3	5.0%	32	53.3%	25	41.7%	13	10.2%	61	47.7%	54	42.2%	1.545	0.462
	They have a hard time remembering	3	5.0%	34	56.7%	23	38.3%	14	10.9%	64	50.0%	50	39.1%	1.947	0.378
	They get damaged quickly.	7	11.7%	29	48.3%	24	40.0%	16	12.5%	48	37.5%	64	50.0%	2.066	0.356
Attitude towards technology	They are averse to digital media.	8	13.3%	30	50.0%	22	36.7%	19	14.8%	59	46.1%	50	39.1%	0.258	0.879
	They refuse to use digital media.	13	21.7%	32	53.3%	15	25.0%	21	16.4%	57	44.5%	50	39.1%	3.63	0.163
	They disapprove of the use of digital media by young people.	19	31.7%	26	43.3%	15	25.0%	29	22.7%	70	54.7%	29	22.7%	2.426	0.297
	They use digital media and social networks.	16	26.7%	28	46.7%	16	26.7%	42	32.8%	68	53.1%	18	14.1%	4.422	0.110
Wisdom	They are an important source of experience and wisdom for young people.	1	1.7%	19	31.7%	40	66.7%	6	4.7%	34	26.6%	88	68.8%	1.552	0.460
	Young people can learn a lot from their elders.	2	3.3%	9	15.0%	49	81.7%	6	4.7%	22	17.2%	100	78.1%	0.369	0.832
	They pass on basic life values to young people.	0	0.0%	11	18.3%	49	81.7%	3	2.3%	33	25.8%	92	71.9%	3.833	0.147
Sociability	They are cute and funny.	2	3.3%	23	38.3%	35	58.3%	8	6.3%	37	28.9%	83	64.8%	2.093	0.351
	They are understanding.	3	5.0%	26	43.3%	31	51.7%	5	3.9%	43	33.6%	80	62.5%	1.969	0.374
	They are generous.	1	1.7%	18	30.0%	41	68.3%	3	2.3%	31	24.2%	94	73.4%	0.753	0.686
	They are cute.	3	5.0%	24	40.0%	33	55.0%	3	2.3%	37	28.9%	88	68.8%	3.571	0.168
	They are empathetic.	4	6.7%	31	51.7%	25	41.7%	5	3.9%	58	45.3%	65	50.8%	1.685	0.431
	They are actively involved in society.	6	10.0%	38	63.3%	16	26.7%	12	9.4%	73	57.0%	43	33.6%	0.916	0.633

* Association between variables is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

significant differences in the prevalence of the presence of negative stereotypes between adolescents who live or not with an elderly person in the joint household.

In determining the knowledge of the term ageism, we assumed that knowledge of ageism in Slovenia prevails among those adolescents who have elderly relatives or live with them in a joint household. It is clear from the results of our study that only 35 individuals with an elderly relative or 18.6% of all respondents stated that they know the concept of ageism. Knowledge of the concept of ageism is noticeably higher among those who live in a joint household with an elderly person than among those who do not live in such a household - it is a borderline statistically

significant connection between the variables ($p=0.052$). The analysis of the relationship between knowledge of the concept of ageism and socio-demographic variables showed that among individuals who do not have an elderly relative, no one knows this concept ($p=0.039$), and most of them (56.4%) are not interested in ageism at all. Many cultures, especially western ones, applaud youth, beauty, and vitality, and that leads to ageism [7]. This reduces opportunities for the elderly to find their place and feel valued in the community, which leads to ageism. Even negative stereotypes about the elderly, which were already acquired in childhood and adolescence, are already internalized in the course of aging and have a negative impact on aging and old age itself [8]. Ayalon (2020) adds that "knowing that ageism affects all of us is

an important message that may help young people to understand why they should not accept ageism” [16].

Our study reveals the views of adolescents, depending on whether or not they live with the elderly in the joint household, on the elderly: mood, traditionalism, frailty, attitude to technology, wisdom and sociability. In the research, we detected a positive attitude related to the wisdom and sociability of the elderly. Wisdom comes from longevity and the accumulation of life experiences [17]. This positive stereotype is probably more widespread among adolescents who are used to listening to life stories and advice from their grandparents, who in our research represent the majority (96.6%) of the adolescent's older relatives. Another positive stereotype - sociability, is probably the result of the adolescent's positive attitude towards grandparents due to spending quality time with them, which is also confirmed by the findings of other authors [15].

Contrary to the expectations, the results of our research revealed that among the interviewed adolescents, ageist stereotypes about the elderly are in the minority, but they are expressed largely in adolescents who live in a joint household with the elderly.

We found in our research that ageist attitudes do not prevail among adolescents, but we were somewhat surprised by the fact that higher percentage of respondents who live with elderly in the joint household than others (35.0 % vs. 18.8 %; $p=0.036$) were more likely to say that the elderly are irritable, and strenuous and fluid (16.7 % vs. 5.5 %; $p=0.015$). This claims have a physiological basis, as aging causes reduced kidney function and thirst perception, which explain the prevalence of dehydration and consequent irritability among the elderly [18]. Adolescents may watch elderly relatives closely for signs of dehydrations and help to ensure that they are drinking enough. Moreover, in a shared household with an elderly person, adolescents can observe him and help prevent or alleviate dehydration in the elderly person. However, care must be taken that these actions do not reduce the self-esteem of the elderly [13]. Due to death, the elderly loses partners, friends and peers more often than other age groups [19]. Persistent grieving can make elderly people strenuous, even if they live with relatives, which was also perceived by our respondents.

Similar to the developed world, demographic growth in Slovenia, which results in an aging society, goes hand in hand with social changes, which in turn include changes in traditional care and support for the elderly. The latter therefore find themselves in an uncertain transition period. That's probably why the results of this study revealed, that regarding the attitude towards the traditionalism of the elderly, adolescents from joint households also agreed above average that the elderly like to criticize ($p=0.045$). These findings can be compared with the findings of Speck and Müller-Böcker (2020) that the elderly are dissatisfied with the transformations of the traditional family unit to the non-traditional way of life, where they may be under-respected, which they can express by criticizing [20].

Lahe (2016) studied the sociological aspects of the attitude of young people (from 15 to 29 years old) to aging, old age and older people in Slovenian postmodern society and she found that ageistic attitudes do not prevail among young people [21]. Nevertheless, the same author notes that in order to prevent ageism among adolescents and to maintain a positive attitude towards the elderly, they must receive knowledge with an emphasis on a positive view of aging and the elderly [21]. In addition, we must not forget that an extended family (comprising more than two generations) still plays an important role in the intergenerational transmission of negative stereotypes about aging and the elderly. Also, the continuous development of medicine enables a longer life and the health problems brought by the years are generally or very often related to therapies. In the case of many elderly people who have any of the chronic diseases, over the years quite a lot of medication accumulates, which the elderly person has to consume every day, which can be an additional source of their criticism.

Certain shortcomings of the research are also listed below. Body frailty is measured by only three statements that do not allow for an adequate level of reliability, so the use of statements in this section should be treated with caution. New items should be added in the hope that these changes will increase reliability. We are also aware that the questionnaire includes only positive or negative stereotypical statements and therefore does not measure all aspects of aging and ageism. Further research would be welcome to shed light on the presence and expression of discriminatory stereotypes about the elderly among young people. The size of the sample ($n = 188$) is adequate in relation to the size of the population ($n = 539$), but it does not provide enough data to be able to determine more precisely how the quality of the sample corresponds to the size of the population in terms of the structure of key sociodemographic parameters. We did not manage to capture a representative sample of the study population, as the response of male students was low (perhaps due to the timing of the survey: the end of the corona virus epidemic, the end of the school year, which may be more stressful for the male population than for the female student population, additional burden on teachers). Therefore, we cannot generalize all the findings to the population of adolescents, but we can draw conclusions to the population of students from the two high schools that participated.

Conclusion

It is necessary to include content on the course of aging and the harmfulness of ageism in formal and informal educational programs for children and adolescents, and to expand education to the field of family and intergenerational cooperation. Knowledge of negative attitudes toward the elderly is fundamental to promoting positive attitudes toward them.

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