

How to cope with ageism? A comparison of younger and older adults in Hungary

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How to cope with ageism?

A comparison of younger and older adults in Hungary

Abstract:

One important aspect of subjective well-being is the relationship people have with others including different age groups. This is however threatened by an increasing level of ageism which refers to prejudices of the society toward certain age groups. The objective of this study is to investigate the factors that influence the occurrence of ageism among younger and older adults using a survey in both age groups. Our results suggest that older and younger adults perceive each other in different ways, but for both groups the quality of contacts with the other group is likely to decrease ageism. Policy makers and business decision makers should strive to create opportunities for the different generations where they can acquire positive experience with people outside their group.

Keywords: ageism, quality of life, social well-being

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics

1. Introduction

There is a widespread belief that quality of life is influenced by the way people subjectively experience it. Policymakers have to deal more and more with factors that determine the subjective well-being of people. The concept of subjective well-being includes individual and social well-being but those are not always in harmony. The individual dimension indicates how much the individual is satisfied with life, how much positive feelings and thoughts, as well as self-confidence he has, while social well-being refers to the quality of relationships of the individual with others, to the relationships with family members, friends or with a wider community. Differences can be identified according to certain age groups: while younger people are rated higher in most of the well-being indicators, they show a lower level of trust toward society.

One of the key elements of social relationship systems are relationships between certain generations: more specifically it is the attitude certain generations show toward other generations, and the extent to which they seek or avoid interactions with each other. However, unfavourable tendencies are taking place in this respect: certain generations tend to form negative attitudes and stereotypical thinking. This phenomenon is called 'ageism' in the literature, and based on the results of previous studies, this affects mostly older people, although older adults may also perceive younger adults in a negative way (Hutchinson, Fox, Laas, Matharu and Urzi, 2010; Drury, Hutchinson and Abrams, 2016).

Ageism has received relatively little attention in research and policy making. With our study we intend to contribute to this research area and highlight its relevance for various stakeholders including policymakers and business decision makers. Moreover, in academic research the investigation of prejudice against older adults is given more attention, the analysis of prejudice against younger adults is less apparent. In our study we investigate both groups and compare them in terms of ageism. First, we introduce the literature on ageism, and ageing anxiety then highlight the importance of intergenerational relationships. Next, we report the findings of a survey in which we analyse the influencing factors of ageism in both age groups.

Finally, let us highlight the practical implications of our work with the following quote:

“The global campaign to combat ageism will provide a platform to change attitudes towards age and ageing and to work together to build a world inclusive of all ages. These changes are essential to ensure health and wellbeing across the life course and will only be

possible through concerted, evidence-based action” (Officer and de la Fuente-Nunez, 2017, p.296).

2. The concepts of ageism and aging anxiety

The World Health Organisation calls attention to the possible dangers of age-based stereotypical thinking. It describes ageism as the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination towards people on the basis of age. This conceptualization is based on the fact that an individual is too old or too young to carry out certain activities. Age-based stereotypes can appear in various areas, like during travelling (Zichun Chu and Juchun Chu , 2013), at workplace (Iweins , Desmette , Yzerbyt and Stinglhamber, 2013), or in the way certain age groups are depicted in media.

The sensitivity and complexity of this topic – in comparison with other stereotypes - is caused by the fact that although older people are considered by younger people as an outsider group, yet this is also as a group where they are going to belong in the future. Nowadays researchers acknowledge that the way society regards certain age groups determines their social role. This specially affects older people since the social judgement of aging is unfavourable, especially in case of women, leading to business practices that exclude certain age groups or that do not ensure equal opportunities for them (Officer and de la Fuente-Nunez, 2017).

A related concept to ageism is aging anxiety which represents the personal fears about the changes associated with aging. While ageism emphasizes the attitudes of social groups (younger people) toward a certain age group (older people), aging anxiety reveals the fears of the individual about getting older. Aging anxiety is greatly influenced by knowledge and experiences regarding aging (Barnett and Adams, 2018).

3. Interactions between generations

The formation of prejudices is greatly influenced by the type of previous personal relationship of the individual with different social groups. This is the starting point of contact theory which was first described by Allport (1954). Age-based segregation is very typical to contemporary societies, which is fuelled by social media too. Individuals typically communicate with their own age group and certain generations have few occasions to obtain experience about other generations. Interactions between groups represent one of the most effective methods of combatting stereotypes (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). With regard to older people, results of studies prove that previous relationship between child and

grandparents influences positively the judgement of older people later (Tam, Hewstone, Harwood, Voci and Kenworthy, 2006). We can conclude from these studies that the quality of contact is more important than the quantity of contact (Allan & Johnson, 2008). Programs and events between certain generations are perfect occasions to create these interactions. The longer the contacts are and the more mutual interactions the cooperation require, the more effective the result will be. Cook, Vreugdenhil and Macnish (2018) for example showed the improvement of attitudes following participation to art events.

Contacts between generations can also help to reduce aging anxiety. The theoretical basis is provided by the extended contact theory (Drury, Hutchinson and Abrams, 2016). Extended contact theory states that being aware of the fact that certain members of the group have positive relationship with other members outside of the group can improve the opinions about members outside the group. In this context it means that if certain individuals in younger people's groups have positive relationship with older people, then it can improve the judgement of the whole group about the elderly. This can help young people in preparing for subsequent direct relationship with older people without experiencing aging anxiety directly.

4. Research questions and methods

Based on the literature review and the main objectives of our study we propose the following research questions:

1. How older adults are perceived by younger adults, and how younger adults are perceived by older adults?
2. Is there an age-based prejudice among younger and older adults and if yes, what factors influence its occurrence?

We suppose that stereotypical attitude is decreased by the experience with other age groups; the frequency and the quality of those contacts can influence the extent of ageism. In EUROSTAT studies the concept of overall experience of life is used to refer to quality of life outcomes. This includes life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, perceived meaning of life. Higher perceptions of life quality might result in an optimistic, positive attitude, while lower perceptions could lead negative attitudes including scapegoating. Finally, we emphasize emotional factors: fears related to aging, and the inclination to nostalgia in case of the elderly can strengthen age-based stereotypes.

We have formulated the following hypotheses for both age groups.

H1.: Ageism among younger adults is negatively related to the frequency of contacts with older adults, the quality of contacts with older adults, the quality of life and positively related to aging anxiety.

H2: Ageism among older adults is negatively related to the frequency of contacts with younger adults, the quality of contacts with young people, the quality of life and positively related to nostalgia proneness.

In order to answer the research questions, we carried out an online survey in December 2018 in Hungary. Our data collection includes a sample of younger and a sample of older people as well. Sample size in case of younger adults' sample is 600, while in case of older people, it is 317. The age limit to be included in the older adults' sample was 60. The maximum age in the younger adults' sample is 35. The distribution of the samples by gender is the following. Younger adults: 42% male, 58% female; Older adults: 31% male, 69% female. The sampling technique is convenience sampling thus our data collection cannot be considered representative, which needs to be considered when interpreting our results. We consider our research exploratory that aims at comparing two age groups and investigate the casual relationship between ageism and some relevant experience and attitude related variables.

Name of scale	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	Source
	Younger adults sample		Older adults sample		
Ageism	15	0,77	15	0,74	Fraboni Scale of Ageism (Fraboni, Salstone and Hughes., 1990)
Contact frequency	5	0,63	3	0,78	Hutchinson, Fox, Lass, Matharu and Urzi (2010)
Aging Anxiety	4	0,75	-	-	Drury-Hutchinson-Abrams (2016)
Nostalgia	-	-	2	0,62	Holbrook (1993)
Contact Quality	3	0,72	3	0,67	Hutchinson, Fox, Lass, Matharu and Urzi (2010)
Quality of life	3	0,75	3	0,76	EUROSTAT

Table 1. Characteristics of the measurements

When operationalizing our constructs (Table 1), we relied on referred scales, the reliability of scales was tested with Cronbach's alpha indices. The same measurement was used in both samples with the exception of aging anxiety and nostalgia. In case of the younger adults sample, we have involved two further items when measuring contact. Overall, the reliability of scales is acceptable. For our main construct the shortened version of Fraboni Scale of Ageism (Fraboni, Salstone and Hughes, 1990) was used (see Table2).

5. Results

From our results, first we highlight how the two age groups perceive each other. The threshold when “old age” begins has several interpretations in the literature too: the concept of cognitive age (Barak, 1987) is widespread, which refers to the fact that the behaviour of individual is influenced by how old he feels and not what his chronological age is. Age is often a perceived subjective variable which was confirmed by our research too. According to younger people in our survey old age starts at 60,7 years on average. Not surprisingly, older adults place the beginning of old age somewhat later than young people, on average at 64,5 years.

The characteristics of older people are related to the change of family life cycle according to younger people (e.g. pensioner, have grandchildren). Other relevant characteristics are significant life experience, deteriorated health conditions and lack of adaptive skills. On the other hand, younger people are described by older people with the following attributes: needing the support of their families, having skills to adapt to changes and pursuing studies. Overall, the direction of opinion is neither very positive, nor very negative but there are relatively large differences among respondents.

In order to answer our second research question, first we introduce the scale items of ageism, then we discuss the results of multiple regression analyses for both samples.

We can see in Table 2 that ageism occurs at medium level among respondents. The perception of younger people among the elderly and the perception of older people among younger people differ from each other mainly in meta-stereotypes (Fowler and Gasiorek, 2018; Finkelstein, Ryan and King, 2013). This means that the basis of negative attitude in a given social group is the assumption that the other group judges unfavourably that social group where the individual belongs to. Younger people for example are more likely to think that older people consider the lifestyle of younger people incorrect or that they have wrong opinion about them, than older people. Attitudes to past seem to be a critical question; older people are sceptical about the connection of young people to their past assuming that no interesting conversations can be expected from them. There are significant differences in the social relationship networks and interpersonal relationships: younger people are more afraid to contact older people than vice versa, and older people think that younger people rather want to make friends with their own age group.

Ageism	Young adults	Older adults	Diff.
Many older/younger people are not interested in making new friends preferring instead the circle of friends they have had for years	3,39	2,79	0,6*
Most older/younger people jut live in the past/do not care about the past, no interesting conversation can be expected from them.	2,22	3,12	-0,9*
Older/younger people complain more than other people do.	3,20	2,45	0,75*
Older/younger people do not need much money to meet their needs.	2,32	1,96	0,36*
Most older/younger people should not be trusted to take care of infants	2,15	2,32	-0,17*
Most older/younger people are interesting individualistic people (reverse scored)	2,15	2,41	-0,26
I don't like when older/younger people try to make conversation with me.	2,40	1,80	0,6*
Older/younger people should find friends from their own age.	2,75	3,05	-0,3*
Older/younger people should feel welcome at the social gatherings of younger/older people. (reverse scored).	2,57	2,26	0,31*
Older/younger people can be very creative (reverse scored)	2,58	2,06	0,52*
Many older/younger people are the happiest when they are with people of their own age,	3,03	3,72	-0,69*
Most older/younger people have a bad opinion about younger/older people.	3,31	2,57	0,74*
Most older/younger people do not approve the lifestyle of younger/older people.	3,56	2,59	0,97*
Most older/younger people try to avoid the company of younger/older people.	2,76	2,88	-0,12
Older/younger people have many interesting stories to tell.(reverse scored)	1,87	2,14	-0,27*
Ageism	2,70	2,54	0,16*

Table 2. Ageism among older and younger people mean values, (1-5 Likert scale) Older adults sample: N=317, Younger adults sample, N=600, *p<0.01

Based on the proposed hypotheses we carried out multiple regression analyses with ageism as the dependent variable and aging anxiety/nostalgia, quality of contact, frequency of contact and quality of life as independent variables. Results for the younger adults sample are presented in Table 3, and results for older adults sample can be found in Table 4.

Table 3 shows that ageing anxiety and quality of contact have a significant impact on ageism. The size of the standardized beta coefficients indicates that quality of contact (beta= -0,381) has the largest impact. This is in line with the literature; the valuable time spent with older people is likely to decrease stereotypes based on age. We have also carried out multiple regression analysis for the older adults' sample. Among the independent variables quality of

contact proved to have significant effect on the dependent variable, and the size of standardized beta (beta=-0,38) gives the same result as in case of younger adults sample. Quality of life has no significant effect in either of the samples while the frequency of contact itself is not significant, either. Contrary to our expectations, the effect of nostalgia is not significant.

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized coefficients Beta	Significance
constant	3,529	,133		,000
aging anxiety	,078	,019	,147	,000
frequency of contact	-,043	,030	-,064	,148
quality of contact	-,236	,028	-,381	,000
quality of life	-,019	,023	-,031	,414

R²=21,6

Table 3: Ageism (1-5 scale) among younger adults, Linear regression model

	Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized coefficients Beta	Significance
constant	3,650	,244		,000
nostalgia	,042	,030	,087	,171
frequency of contact	-,080	,041	-,145	,055
quality of contact	-,236	,046	-,380	,000
quality of life	-,013	,046	-,019	,776

R²=27,9

Table 4: Ageism (1-5 scale) among older adults. Linear regression model

6. Discussion

What old age is, partially depends on biological age but it is also a question of subjective judgments. According to the concept of cognitive age, the behaviour of individuals is rather determined by how old they feel, therefore the definition of old age depends on individual perceptions, too. Typically, as people age, the gap between the cognitive and chronological age increases: in other words, people tend to feel many years younger than their actual age is. This tendency is confirmed in our research too, since according to younger people old age starts four years earlier than according to older people. The description of younger adults by older adults and vice versa mostly relates to the change of family life cycle and less to the judgement of competencies.

Based on this we can conclude that ageism – based on the results of our study – is an existing phenomenon, although its extent is medium. We found that the opinion of older adults and younger adults about each other is not the same: while younger adults are rather driven by

the need of isolation and fear of indirect interactions, the prejudices of older adults result from their different relation to the past. The phenomenon of meta-stereotypes was also identified. This concept suggests that older people presume that younger people don't want to get in touch with them as they rather stick to their own age group, and young people presume that older people have a bad opinion about them.

An important result relates to the different impacts of quantity and quality of interactions. In both samples, the most important factor that could decrease ageism is the quality of interaction with the other age group. The way people relate to time (the future and the past) may influence their attitude to aging. For younger people fear about getting old influences negatives attitudes toward older people. Knowledge about aging process (that was not measured in this study) could help younger people to cope with that feeling. On the other hand, nostalgia did not influence ageism, probably because this might also represent the positive memories, that prevent the retrieval of negative feelings such as prejudices. For younger people ageism and aging anxiety are not contradictory affective states. Quality of life did not have the proposed impact either, probably due to its indirect relationship with the formation of prejudices.

We think that our research results contribute to the extension of knowledge about ageism and draws the attention of various stakeholders to take more initiatives in order create equal chances for all age groups.

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