Evaluation of young adults' attitudes towards the elderly

Ocena postaw młodych dorosłych wobec osób w podeszłym wieku

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Abstract

Introduction. As a result of demographic aging of the Polish society there is a need to diagnose the situation through the study of public opinion on the perception of the elderly. *Aim.* To determine attitudes of young adults between 18-35 years of age towards older people. *Material and methods.* 225 people participated in the study. The following research tools: personal inquiry form of socio-demographic data; Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale and Implicit Association Test were used. *Results.* Kogan's Scale mean score was 80.68 points. There has been no significant difference between the sexes. The mean respondents felt age was 22.45 years. The mean age they wanted to live to was 84.43 years. The respondents mean age which they would like to have, if they could choose was 20.66 years. The mean age at which respondents agreed that old age begins was 60.91 years. *Conclusions.* Young adults in Polish society have slightly positive attitude towards older people regardless of gender. The men wanted to live to a higher age, and have a lower age than women. Those claiming the greater age as the threshold of senility characterized by a higher acceptance of the elderly. Those who were and felt older chose higher age, they would like to have. People feeling older pointed lower age they would like to live to, while older people have recognized a higher age as the threshold of old age. (Gerontol Pol 2018; 26; 239-245)

Key words: *ageism, attitudes towards the elderly, Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale, Implicit Association Test*

Streszczenie

Wstęp. W wyniku demograficznego starzenia się społeczeństwa polskiego istniej potrzeba diagnozowania sytuacji poprzez badanie społecznej opinii odnośnie postrzegania osób starszych. *Cel.* Określenie postaw młodych dorosłych pomiędzy 18-35 roku życia wobec osób w starszych. *Materiał i metody.* W badaniu wzięło udział 225 osób. Wykorzystano następujące narzędzia badawcze: prywatny formularz informacyjny z danymi socjodemograficznymi; Kwestionariusz Postaw wobec Ludzi Starszych Kogan*; oraz Test Ukrytych Skojarzeń. *Wyniki.* Średni wynik w Kwestionariuszu Kogan wyniósł 80,68 pkt (pytania pozytywne 40,70 pkt; negatywne 39,97 pkt). Wewnętrzna spójność na podstawie wyniku Alfa Cronbacha wyniosła 0,622. Odnotowano brak istotnej różnicy pomiędzy płciami. Średnia wieku na ile się czuli respondenci wyniosła 22,45 lata. Średnia wieku, którego chcieli dożyć respondenci wyniosła 84,43 lata (różnica pomiędzy płciami p = 0,042). Średnia wieku, który chcieliby mieć respondenci, gdyby mogli wybrać wyniosła 20,66 lat (różnica pomiędzy płciami p = 0,049). Średnia wieku, w którym respondenci uznali, że zaczyna się starość wyniosła 60,91 lat (różnica pomiędzy płciami p = 0,042). *Wnioski.* Młodzi dorośli w polskim społeczeństwie mają delikatnie pozytywny stosunek wobec osób starszych niezależnie od płci. Średnia wieku, którego chcieliby dożyć bądź chcieliby posiadać jest zależna od płci. Mężczyźni pragnęli dożyć wyższego wieku oraz posiadać niższy wiek niż kobiety. Osoby uznające późniejszy wiek za próg starości cechowały się większą akceptacją wobec osób starszych. Osoby, które były starsze i czuły się starsze wskazywały wyższy wiek, który chciałyby posiadać. Osoby czujące się starzej wskazały niższy wiek, którego chciałyby dożyć, zaś osoby starsze uznały wyższy wiek początku starości. (Gerontol Pol 2018; 26; 239-245)

Słowa kluczowe: *ageizm, stosunek do ludzi starszych, skala Kogan, Test Ukrytych Skojarzeń*

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Introduction

Currently, there is an intensive change in the age structure of Polish society, expressed by an increase in the percentage of people aged 65 and more. Demographic aging of the population is the result of increasing longevity, declining birth rates and at the same time – the increased emigration of young people [1]. In the Polish society we are dealing with demographically old population, which is defined as a society in which the proportion of people over 60 surpassed 12%, and over 65-8%. Demographic data of the Central Statistical Office (CSO) from 2014 show that in 2013, people aged 65 or more accounted for 14.7% of the total population. In addition, based on the available forecasts it predicted that the aging of the Polish society will proceed over the next decades. Based on the demographic forecast GUS, covering the period up to 2050 the percentage of the population aged 65 and over in the total population will be in 2030 amounted to 23.3%, and by 2050 – up to 32.7% [2]. In addition, attention should be paid to the double aging process, expressing itself in more rapid (than in the entire population of people aged 65 and more) increase in the percentage of people aged 80 or over [1]. It is estimated that by 2040 people over eighty will represent 35.8% of the elderly population [2]. In addition, according to demographic projections of EUROSTAT population of Poland would have the fastest pace of aging in relation to other European countries, remaining in 2060 the oldest country on the continent [3]. Cited demographic data indicate the essence of the problem, which Polish society will face.

One of the important issues that should be discussed in the context of the aging of the Polish population is the social opinion on the perception of old age and aging, because the analysis of the attitudes of society towards the elderly can help diagnose their situation. Stereotypical views on life and human development, can contribute to the mistreatment of older people in society, by lowering their self-esteem and sense of control over their own lives, as well as by the decrease in the sense of quality of life [4].

Public attitudes towards old age are characterized by ambiguity. Some researchers suggest dominance of negative attitudes towards the elderly among different age groups [5] in relation to a number of factors, ie. The efficiency of cognitive function, health status, level of self-care (eg. hygiene), personality factors (eg. grouchiness, rudeness, bad temper) and the lack of daily contact with the elderly [6]. On the negative attitudes towards the elderly it consists of the stereotypical perception of old age and aging by attributing negative characteristics [7], and the social discrimination on grounds of age [8]. The equivalent of the described phenomenon is the term ageism developed by [9]. For the base of ageism considered gerantophobia, that is young people conscious and unconscious fear of growing old and death. According to the researchers, these fears are transferred to the elderly in the form of stereotyping and prejudice [10]. In addition, sources of ageism can be traced back to the cult of youth, and the lack of sufficient, reliable knowledge about the aging of society. Scientific reports also show positive stereotypes, which represents positive age bias that is discrimination in favor of the elderly. There are eight positive socially accepted stereotypes of old age, ie. cheerfulness, kindness, trust, influence, political power, health-promoting life style, greater freedom than in young adults [11].

Researchers for years highlight the need for the elimination of ageism, by shaping a positive image of old age. A positive vision of old age is beneficial for the health and proper functioning of the elderly. The efficiency of the elderly promotes a positive perception of old age, both by themselves and younger people. In terms most important factors contributing to a positive perception of old age is a frequent contact and strong personal relationships with older people, especially grandparents and great-grandparents. Therefore, paying attention to intergenerational discourse is recommended. Scientific reports indicate that the social status of older people in modern societies is improving and the vitality of the current generation of older people is increasing [12]. The result of the presented phenomenon – in the opinion of researchers – is a growing social disapproval of ageism in modern society [13]. In this context, the question arises whether the changing status of older people is reflected in the attitudes of social generation of young adults to old age?

Aim

The aim of our study was to determine the implicit and explicit attitudes of the Polish young adults aged 18-35 years of age towards the elderly.

Material and methods

Participants

A cross-sectional study – conducted by Department of Geriatrics *Nicolaus Copernicus* University Ludwik Rydygier *Collegium Medicum* in Bydgoszcz in the form of an anonymous questionnaire published in open source on-line survey application LimeSurvey (https://ankiety.

ucntn.umk.pl/index.php/387585/lang-pl). The average *survey completion time* – 10 minutes. The duration of the study: November 2015 – May 2016. The entire study sample consisted of 225 people. The inclusion criteria was the age range of 18-35 years and completeness of the survey.

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed via an online survey system LimeSurvey *Nicolaus Copernicus* University in Torun account. The survey was available from November to May 2016 for users logged on the system of *Nicolaus Copernicus* University and others outside the university. Link to the survey was also published on social networks, and that increased the number of recipients filling a questionnaire.

Research Instruments

The questionnaire posted in the online survey application LimeSurvey was constructed from three research tools: i) a personal inquiry form of socio-demographic data, ie. sex, age, education, professional activity; ii) The Polish Version of Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale to identify explicit attitudes towards the elderly; iii) and the Implicit Association Test to determine the covert attitudes towards the elderly.

The Polish Version of Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale

Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale (KOPS) is a tool used to assess explicit (declared) society's attitudes towards the elderly. The scale comes in many languages and with different number of questions. For the purposes of our study we chose version consisting of 26 questions, including 13 positive and 13 negative statements about the elderly [14]. The statements concern the following areas: the place of residence, needs diversity, individuality, intergenerational relations, dependency, cognitive functioning, appearance (exterior) and potential. An example of a positive approach in the scale is the statement: "People grown wiser with the coming of old age" or "Most old people seem quite clean and neat in their personal appearance" while negative: "Most old people tend to let their homes become shabby and unattractive" or "Most old people are irritable, grouchy, and unpleasant". Every sentence in the questionnaire assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Range of points scored is in the range from 26 to 130, wherein the higher the score, the more positive attitude, and a neutral score is 78 points.

Implicit Association Test

Implicit Association Test (IAT) is a measurement tool [15] to assess the implicit attitudes which automatically affect the reactions of the individual. To create tests on the implicit associations computer programs are used. One of the most popular platforms created for this purpose is a program Inquisite. "Project Implict" was launched in 1998, which is a database of implicit associations tests. There are tests for implicit attitudes towards: gender, sexual orientation, cultures of other countries, the silhouette of the body and age. This study was based on a portion of the test of implicit associations from "Project Implict". The test consists of several tasks starting from simple one, followed by the complex task. In this study only unassembled tasks with simple categorization referring to the section of the hidden associations test were used. The following questions were used:

i) How old do you feel?
ii) What age do you hope to live?
iii) If you could choose, what age would you be?
iv) Which statements best describe you? (I strongly prefer young people to old people, I moderately prefer young people to old people, I slightly prefer young people to old people, I like young people and old people equally, I slightly prefer old people to young people, I moderately prefer old people to young people, I strongly prefer old people to young people)

Statistical analysis

For all tested parameters the basic statistical characteristics calculations were used. Statistical analysis of the collected numeric material started by examining the compatibility of decomposition of analyzed variables with normal distribution. For this purpose Shapiro-Wilk test was used. Comparison of variables with normal distribution was made with Student's t test, otherwise the U Mann-Whitney test was used. In order to compare the quantitative variables correlation analysis was used and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was found. Statistical significance level was set at $p \le 0.05$.

Results

Sample selection

The study included 225 people. The research group was between 18 and 35 years old. Mean age was 23.56

years (95% CI 23.07-24.04) and there was no significant difference in age between women and men. 81.78% of study participants were women (n = 184), 18.22% male (n = 41). People with primary education accounted for 1.78% (n = 4); with secondary education 57.78% (n = 130), and with higher education 40.44% (n = 91). Professionally active people accounted for 35.56% (n = 80) and non-employed persons 64.44% (n = 145).

Mean Kogan scores and variance analysis

Internal consistency between positive and negative statements was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha result (0.622). The mean score on a Kogan Scale was 80.68 (95% CI 79.39-81.96) and there was no significant difference between women and men. The average result of positive questions was 40.70 (95% CI 39.95-41.45) and there was no significant difference between women and men. The average score of negative questions was 39.97 (95% CI 39.97-39.22) and there was no significant difference between gender (Table II).

Variance analysis of Implicit Association Test

The respondents mean felt age was 22.45 (95% CI 21.88-23.02) and there was no significant difference in age between women and men. The average age that the respondents wanted to live to was 84.43 (95% CI 82.69-86.16). It significantly differed (P = 0.042) among women whose mean was 81.54 (95% CI 81.54-85.20), and men whose mean was 89.26 (95% CI 84.49-94.03). The mean age respondents would choose to be if they could was 20.66 (95% CI 19.85-21.46). And differed significantly (P = 0.049) among women whose mean was 21.03 (95% CI 20.16-21.90), and men whose mean was

19.00 (95% CI 16.97-21.03). The mean age at which respondents agreed that old age begins was 60.91 (95% CI 59.85-61.96). Women whose mean was 61.48 (95% CI 60.41-62.56), significantly differed (P = 0.042) from men whose mean was 58.32 (95% CI 55.15-61.48) (Table I).

Correlation of Kogan's Scale *vs.* Implicit Association Test

The results analysis demonstrated no statistical significance in the correlation of: i) the Kogan Scale and age (p = 0.65); ii) the Kogan Scale and respondents felt age (p = 0.97); iii) Kogan Scale and age subjects would like to live to (p = 0.09); *iv*) Kogan Scale and age the respondents would like to have if they could choose (p = 0.55). In turn, the statistical significance was obtained in the correlation of Kogan Scale and mean age of commencement of old age (p = 0.008). The respondents recognizing a later age as the threshold of old age showed a higher acceptance for the elderly (Table II).

Correlation of age *vs.* Implicit Association Test

Analysis of the results demonstrated no statistically significant correlations between: i) age subjects would like to live to and age the respondents would like to have if they could choose (p = 0.38); ii) respondents age and the age they would like to live to (p = 0.62). In turn, the statistical significance was demonstrated in correlations between: i) the respondents actual and felt age (p < 0.001); ii) the respondents age and age they would choose if they could (p < 0.001); iii) subjects felt age and age they wanted to have if they could (p < 0.001); *iv*) the subjects

Table I. Parameters characteristic

	All (n = 225)				Women (n = 184)				Men (n = 41)				
	Mean	CI* -95%	CI* +95%	Stand. Error	Mean	CI* -95%	CI* +95%	Stand. Error	Mean	CI* -95%	CI* +95%	Stand. Error	p (U Mann Whitney)
Age	23.56	23.07	24.04	0.25	23.43	22.91	23.96	0.27	24.10	22.79	25.40	0.65	0.400
How old do you feel?	22.45	21.88	23.02	0.29	22.42	21.81	23.04	0.31	22.56	21.01	24.11	0.77	0.751
What age do you hope to live?	84.43	82.69	86.16	0.88	83.37	81.54	85.20	0.93	89.26	84.49	94.03	2.36	0.042
If you could choose what age would you be?	20.66	19.85	21.46	0.41	21.03	20.16	21.90	0.44	19.00	16.97	21.03	1.00	0.049
When does old age begin?	60.91	59.85	61.96	8.01	61.48	60.41	62.56	7.40	58.32	55.15	61.48	10.02	0.042
Kogan (pts.)	80.68	79.39	81.96	9.70	80.33	78.87	81.78	9.90	82.22	79.47	84.97	8.72	0.442
Kogan positive statements (pts.)	40.70	39.95	41.45	5.66	40.49	39.66	41.32	5.66	41.66	39.87	43.44	5.66	0.320
Kogan negative statements (pts.)	39.97	39.22	40.73	5.73	39.84	38.97	40.71	5.93	40.56	39.07	42.05	4.73	0.646

*CI – confidence interval

Table II. Correlations of studied parameters

Correlations	R*	p*
Kogan (pts.) & Age	-0.03	0.65
Kogan (pts.) & Felt age?	0.00	0.97
Kogan (pts.) & What age do you hope to live?	0.11	0.09
Kogan (pts.) & If you could choose what age would you be?	0.04	0.55
Kogan (pts.) & What age in your opinion one starts to be regarded as "old"? (age)	0.18	0.008
Age & Felt age?	0.54	< 0.001
Age & What age do you hope to live?	-0.03	0.62
Age & If you could choose what age would you be?	0.26	< 0.001
Felt age? & What age do you hope to live?	-0.14	0.04
Felt age? & If you could choose what age would you be?	0.35	< 0.001
What age do you hope to live? & If you could choose what age would you be?	-0.06	0.38
Kogan positive statements & Kogan negative statements	0.51	< 0.001
Threshold of old age & Age	0.17	0.011

*R – correlation, p – statistical significance

felt age and age they would like to live to (p = 0.04); v) and the age of patients and the age which define the threshold of the old age (p = 0.011) (Table II).

Discussion

The results of this study showed that Polish society of young adults manifests slightly positive attitude towards the elderly, because the average score on a Kogan scale (80.68 points) crossed the threshold of the neutral result (78 points). The results are similar to those scientific research, which used Kogan scale to assess the overall attitudes index of Polish society of young adults to the elderly [16] based on the results analysis found that the study group showed a slight predominance of positive over negative attitudes. A similar picture of the elderly among young adults outlined [17].

Foreign scientific research examining the attitudes of young adults towards an aging society on the basis of the Kogan scale, were mainly carried out in medical students environments. An overview of the numerous scientific reports shows – like this study – that young adults in Sweden, Italy, Jordan, Taiwan, China, Turkey, and Malawi present slightly positive attitudes towards the elderly. Demonstrated similar attitude of young adults from different cultures towards the elderly can be globalization outcome and may result in a greater interdependence and integration of the countries in social, cultural and economic terms [18].

The International Eurobaramet study covering 27 European Union countries also assessed public opinion on attitudes towards the elderly. To measure the overall attitudes rate the original questionnaire consisting of 37 closed questions multiple choice was used. Polish society asked to identify attitudes (negative, neutral and po-

sitive) which presents their country towards people over 55 years believed that 52% of citizens perceive them positively, respectively 29% negatively and 15% neutrally. At the same time polish opinions demonstrated to be less favorable than in the EU – 27 (61% positive, 28% negative, neutral 9%) [12].

To accurately determine the attitudes of young adults towards the elderly assessing implicit attitudes seems to play an important role. It is designed to detect the individual's attitudes towards a specific object on an unconscious or limited consciousness level, manifesting itself in the automatic, spontaneous behavior. The study [19] – similarly to the analysis of the explicit attitudes – did not observe negative image of implicit attitudes among young adults to the elderly. At the same time there is no latent tendency to stereotyping of older people by young adults. In turn, the European Social Survey (ESS) to the question about the positive *vs.* negative attitude towards people aged 20 and over 70 on a 0-10 points scale (where 0 points being very negative; 10 pts. very positive), young adult Poles on average gave about 7.5 points for both age groups. Thus demonstrating the positive nature of the investigated implicit attitudes towards the elderly [20].

Old age has both biological and social dimension. There is no objective or natural threshold of old age. The age limit, after which the individual begin to age is also determined by social and cultural context as well as social environment. Social opinions on the beginning of old age, probably reflects to some extent current observations of the condition of the elderly, as well as their activity. Analysis of the results of their own showed that the young adults the beginning of old age begins at the age of 60.91 years. The average age differed significantly between the sexes (p = 0.042). According to the

men threshold of old age starts earlier (58.32 years) than think of women (61.48 years). Social opinions on the beginning of old age, probably reflects to some extent colloquial observations of the condition of the elderly, as well as their activity. Analysis of this study results showed that the young adults considered the age of 60.91 years as a beginning of old age. The mean age differed significantly between the sexes (p = 0.042). According to the men – threshold of old age starts earlier (58.32 years) than in a women opinions (61.48 years). Additionally there was a significant difference between the sexes in answers regarding age, the respondents would like to live to and would like to currently have, where men would live longer and be younger, respectively. Furthermore, based on the Kogan scale correlation with the subjective assessment of the threshold of old age, we learn that a person who recognize a later age as the beginning of old age is characterized by a greater acceptance of the elderly (p = 0.008). In the Eurobarometer survey, Poles think on average, 62.8 years is when people think one starts to be regarded as "old", and – as in our study – reported women feel that old age begins slightly later than men (women – 65 years, men – 62.7 years) [12]. In turn accordingly to the European Research Group on Attitudes to Age (EURAG) the Polish society indicated 64 year-old people to be deemed "old" [20]. Additionally the mean age obtained in the present study, was lower than the average in the EU-27 countries (63.9 years) [12] and the average in the countries of ESS – 31 (62 years) [20].

Conclusions

We have shown that young adults in Polish society have a slightly positive attitude towards older people regardless of gender. Furthermore the results of this study indicate that the average age the subjects would like to live to or would like to have depends on gender. Subsequently, young adult men wanted to live longer and be younger if they were to choose than women. It was also observed that a person recognizes a later age one starts to be regarded as "old", showed greater acceptance of the elderly. On the other hand, people who were older and felt older showed higher age they would like to actually have. Moreover, the people feeling older showed lower age they would like to live to, while older people have recognized a higher age of onset of old age.

Conflict of interest
None

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