



## Perception of the Elderly by Youth and Seniors in Poland

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### Dear Editor-in-Chief

Statistical data from the turn of the 20th century (1) 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 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).

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.

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 in Białystok (statute no. R-I-002/651/2012), on a group of 200 junior high school students, 200 university students from the Białystok Medical University Faculty of Health Sciences, 200 residents of Public Nursing Homes and 200 members of Universities of the Third Age.

The study used a questionnaire created by the authors concerning ascertaining the opinions about ageing 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-squared 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<sup>®</sup> SPSS<sup>®</sup> Statistics program, version 20.0.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (3) considers the 60th year of life as the onset of old age and within it defines three distinct stages:

- from 60 to 74 years of age – the so called early old age in which those described as the young-old are classified;
- from 75 - 89 years of age – the late old age in which the old-old are classified;
- 90 years of age and more – the so called advanced old age where those who have reached this stage are considered to have lived a "long life". In our study participants were mostly convinced that old age refers 70 years of age and older. 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%). In the group of residents of PNH the answer "71-75 years old" (39.0%) was the most often given while in the group of UTA members it was "76 years old or older" (58.0%). An even distribution of answers was recorded concerning respect shown to the

elderly by members of society. Over 41.0% of all young respondents and 44.5% of all old participants were of the opinion that senior citizens are not respected by society, and a slightly lower number of participants (40.5% of all young participants and 38.8% of all old respondents) 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 1.

**Table 1:** Respondent opinion concerning respect shown the elderly in society

			Group		Total	Group		Total
			Junior High School Students	University Students		PNH	UTA	
Do you think that the elderly are respected in society?	yes	n	39	34	73	41	26	67
		%	19.5%	17.0%	18.2%	20.5%	13.0%	16.7%
	no	n	78	87	165	80	98	178
		%	39.0%	43.5%	41.3%	40.0%	49.0%	44.5%
	it's hard to say	n	83	79	162	79	76	155
		%	41.5%	39.5%	40.5%	39.5%	38.0%	38.8%
Totals	n	200	200	400	200	200	400	
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Research conducted in November of 2009 by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) titled "Current problems and events" (4) revealed the opinions of Poles about the elderly including their attitude to their own old age. 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 young respondents and 44.5% of old surveyed were of the opinion that older people are not respected in society. Most junior high-school students (48.5%), most university students (71.0%) and

most members of UTA (63.5%) were of the opinion that it is easier to go through old age in the countries of Western Europe than in Poland. When it comes to residents of PNH, 43.0% gave the answer "it's hard to say", and 42.0% agreed with the same answer as the respondents of the group of members of UTA. Answers to the questions posed have been presented in Table 2.

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.

**Table 2:** 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	Group		Total
			Junior High School Students	University Students		PNH	UTA	
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	84	127	211
		%	48.5%	71.0%	59.7%	42.0%	63.5%	52.8%
	no	n	30	7	37	30	21	51
		%	15.0%	3.5%	9.3%	15.0%	10.5%	12.7%
	it's hard to say	n	73	51	124	86	52	138
		%	36.5%	25.5%	31.0%	43.0%	26.0%	34.5%
	Totals	n	200	200	400	200	200	400
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

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