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STEREOTYPES AND PERCEPTIONS IN SOCIETY OF THE ELDERLY AS A SYMPTOM OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN EUROPEAN, ASIAN AND AMERICAN COUNTRIES

A b s t r a c t: At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there were significant changes in the age structure of society, although they show different intensity in different regions of the world. The effects of the global aging of the population and its regional diversification imply new phenomena and problems, not only demographic, but most of all economic, political, cultural, mental and social [Abramski, 2017]. The cult of youth is promoted in aging societies, in which a larger group of people 50+ participates, and the dominance of values characteristic of this period is becoming more and more a source of stereotypes and discrimination against the elderly [Mizińska, 2008]. The differences in the perception of people aged 50+ result from the different cultures prevailing in these countries. The aim of the work is to systematize knowledge about the stereotype of a mature and elderly person and to show cultural differences in the perception of older people in European, Asian and American countries.

K e y   w o r d s: stereotypes, perception, elderly people, cultural differences.

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INTRODUCTION

Demographic aging of the population is a global process. Scientists around the world look at old age from various points of view determined by the discipline represented [see: Ikels et al., 1992; Taylor, Walker, 1998; McNair, Flynn, 2005; Barnes, Smeaton and Taylor, 2009; Metcalf, Meadows, 2010; Mock, Eibach, 2011; Weiss, Perry, 2020]. The positive fact that human life is prolonged inevitably leads to an aging population. According to the national report,

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a systematic increase in the number of people aged 50+ is forecast in the coming years. In 2035, mature and elderly people may constitute over 30% of the Polish population [MRPiPS, 2017]. Population aging is a process that affects almost all regions of the world. The highest level of demographic aging has been present on the European continent for half a century. It is worth noting that the dynamics of population aging in Europe since the 1990s is lower than in Central and South America or Asia, which means that this phenomenon spreads to other continents and countries [Janiszewska, 2017].

It should be noted that in aging societies, in which a wider group of people 50+ participates, the cult of youth is promoted, and the dominance of values characteristic of this period is becoming more and more a source of discrimination against older people [Mizińska, 2008]. According to Kołodziej [2006], aging is perceived as a process of unfavorable changes taking place in the biological, mental and social sphere, characterized by the loss of health, beauty, physical strength, intellectual performance, narrowing of interests, social isolation, a set of conservative attitudes and views, addiction. from others. This is obviously too simplistic a picture and harmful to the elderly [after: Popiołek, Januszek, 2018]. The late period of human life is associated with many stereotypes, which are expressed in various cultural messages [Pawlina, 2011]. Nowicka [2009] found that "the older generation mainly due to his life experience, he is respected above all in structurally and culturally stable societies with a slow pace of change. In faster transforming cultures, the importance of acquired knowledge decreases; it ages with people" [ibid. p. 306-307].

The main goal of the work is to systematize knowledge about the stereotype of a mature and elderly person and to show cultural differences in the perception of older people in European, Asian and American countries.

1. THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE STEREOTYPE

The term stereotype is derived from the combination of two Greek words στερεός (stereos), strong, solid, and τύπος (typos), impression [Summers, 1995]. This word was first used in 1798 by Didot to describe ready-made matrices used in the printing process [Wójcik, 2008]. It was only in 1922 that the term stereotype adopted a definition similar to that which is known today, thanks to the American journalist and political scientist Walter Lippmann [Kleg, 1993].

In the book In the "Public opinion" of the precursor (Lippmann, 1922), the following passage can be seen: "From [...] the buzzing and colorful complexity of the external world, we capture what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive what we have captured in the form of stereotyped by our culture" [ibid., p. 82]. And further: "We do not have the time and opportunities to learn more about everything. Instead, we note features that denote a well-known

type and fill the rest of the picture with the stereotypes we carry in our heads" [ibid., p. 89].

From the above we can see that for Lippmann, the stereotypes were mental images about social groups that serve people to explain the outside world. It is worth noting that the creator of the scientific concept left behind a number of ideas and pointed out significant ideas, but never gave a single clear definition of the stereotype. Nevertheless, his observations are reflected in later publications [see: McGill, 1931; LaViolette, Silvert, 1951; Allport, 1954].

For example, according to Higgins [1996, p. 133–168], stereotypes are cognitive constructs participating in the information processing process, influencing understanding and interpreting the information provided. On the other hand, Kurcz [1995] describes stereotypes as the poverty of content related to the simplification of the group image, which is associated with inadequacy, the emotional color accompanying a given category and its weak differentiation. On the other hand, Weigl [2000] defines stereotypes as excessive simplification, evaluation and over-generalization with a simultaneous low susceptibility to change. For the purposes of this study, the definition of Scheinder [2004] was adopted, which says that stereotypes are an excessive generalization of beliefs about the characteristics of members of a given group.

The presented examples show that there are many ways to define stereotypes in science, but none of the definitions has gained a generally recognized name. Researchers describe stereotypes mainly in two dimensions. The first dimension defines a stereotype as the mental representations or cognitive schema of some group [Fiske, Taylor, 1991; Stangor, Lange, 1993]. In the second dimension, the stereotype evaluates the described objects [Dovidio, Gaertner, 1986; Zalewska, 2013].

2. STEREOTYPES OF THE ELDERLY

Age stereotypes differ from other stereotypes in that age is a continuous, not categorical, variable. Age groups are artificially created because their boundaries are variable and context-dependent. On their basis, stereotypes are created that classify people as "old", "young" and "middle-aged" [Pitt-Catsouphes, Matz-Costa, and Brown, 2010]. There are currently several studies that deal with the issue of age classification. For example, Wegge, Roth, Neuback, Schmidt, and Kanfer [2008] study age categorization in the context of work, and Lawrence [1998] Kulik, Roberson, and Perry [2007] analyze the normative age associated with a specific position or industry. Their results show that age distinctions may affect the individual perception of people, and thus shift the boundaries of a specific age category (e.g. older, younger people), and thus the stereotypes related to them.

The process of social classification takes place already at the level of a simple distinction, which is the determination, as a result of various social or indivi-

dual practices, of the age that determines the threshold of old age. The lexemes: senior, silver and the forms 50+, 60+, 70+ [Konieczna, 2016] are among the euphemisms that spread rapidly in the second decade of the 21st century. Round numbers are defined as the moment of passing adulthood and entering in old age [Gilleard, Higgs, 2000]. Although the lower limit for "older workers" varies according to the occupations. A review of the literature shows that the most common minimum age for older workers is 50 or 55 [Sterns, Doverspike, 1989].

With age, every person experiences biological and psychological changes related to the aging process [Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2012]. They make it together Over the years, employee productivity may decline, especially in the field of mental work that requires sensory perception, working memory and fast information processing [Piesiak, 2013]. The 50+ stereotypes are based on these statements. However, the conclusions built on their basis do not take into account the different pace of aging and significant individual differences between people. Unfortunately, many social environments stigmatize the elderly, perceiving them through the prism of stereotypes: older = weaker. As early as the 1950s, researchers began collecting data to show that society as a whole has a negative view of aging and older people [Nelson, 2003]. Simplification and generalization ignore important pro-development and pro-quality issues of old age. The most common commonly distinguished views in society towards the elderly there are those relating to their disability, negative approach to life, passivity, aversion, isolation and conservatism [Hebda, Biela, 2015]. On the other hand, from the perspective of employers, an employee aged 50+ is dominated by: low level of education and technical skills, low work efficiency, unsatisfactory creativity, lack of innovation and poor adaptability to the changing market requirements [Richert-Kaźmierska, Stankiewicz, 2013].

Kukulska [2008] distinguished two forms that the process of creating a stereotype towards the elderly may take:

"Individual - as gerontophobia, that is, an irrational fear, not supported by any rational arguments, of the elderly, any contacts with them, the fear of the very process of aging, passing, and in extreme and borderline cases - fear of gerontophobia (the liking to be in the company of people aged senior, noticing the positive sides in this period of life, isolation from peers for the love of old age and willingness to help at all costs);

Institutional - which is about the policy and behavior of institutions or features of the social structure that discriminate against the elderly. A telling example of institutional privilege can be gerontocracy, in which the management system and the social order are established and controlled by the senior. A negative manifestation (contrary to the previous one) is the refusal of medical procedures due to age, prohibition of driving or compulsory retirement age dictated by the good of the elderly" [after: Hebda, Biela, 2015, p. 56].

Stereotypes, awareness of an unfavorable social image, as well as experiencing discrimination make older people feel undesirable and unhelpful, as a consequence they may withdraw from active life, or significantly limit its scope, which leads to a monotonous, lonely existence.

3. PERCEPTION OF THE ELDERLY IN SOCIETY IN EUROPEAN, ASIAN AND AMERICAN CULTURES

There are many theories about the perception of aging. One is the theory of social representations, which assumes that aging within a given culture is a form of shared cultural representation and therefore constitutes a coherent system of ideas, values and customs [Moscovici, 1984].

The perception of aging is studied on many different levels, including biological, social or emotional [cf. Eagly, Wood and Diekman, 2000; Fung, Rice and Carstensen, 2005]. In developed countries, having a social status related to e.g. with prestige is a dynamic thing that changes over the years. Despite the significant and constantly growing group of people 50+ in societies, their position and the respect generally accepted are different from each other.

Culture, understood as the entirety of the spiritual and material achievements of a given civilization, formed over hundreds of years, has an undoubted influence on the shaping of the social hierarchy [Wielka Encyclopedia PWN, 2003]. Intercultural differences between societies are defined, inter alia, by through relations between social strata, the entrenchment of traditionalism, the dominant view of individualism or collectivism, making spontaneous decisions to what extent planning and stability are considered necessary, hierarchical relationships or mixing with other cultures [Walter, Cookie, 2007].

Early research on the perception of people aged 50+ focused on the socio-economic aspect. Scientists [e.g. Simmons, 1945; Maxwell, 1970; Bengtson, Dowd, Smith and Inkeles, 1975; Palmore, Manton, 1974] have indicated a correlation between the level of economic development and industrialization and attitudes towards the elderly. It was believed [Cowgill, 1970] that industrialization devalues the knowledge of the elderly based on experience and disrupts the traditional model of the extended family. It is worth mentioning that contemporary science pays more attention to intercultural differences in values and belief systems that model the reactions of a given culture [Inglehart, Baker, 2000].

In European culture, the perception of the elderly was changing. In the Age of Enlightenment, old age was considered a phase of life that has rights. The topics related to life extension were very popular. Threads affirming the values of life, wisdom and value of the elderly appeared in the literature. Similarly positive images of old age were present in the 19th century. Seniors were treated with respect for their special role in a family of many generations. They occupied

a position that was to guarantee order and security. Features such as peace, contentment, kindness, loyalty and usefulness to the family were cherished [Krüger, 2009]. The modern image of old age, by changing the model of culture, in which the dominant role is taken over by younger and younger generations, departs from the Enlightenment. The young generation no longer imitates their parents unconditionally, but becomes a link between the old, a new reality. More and more often it can be observed that due to the dynamics of technological development, which is more difficult for the elderly to keep up with, the young generation takes a dominant role - parents learn from their children. According to Pankowska [2013], the negative image of old age intensifies, which means that older people do not want to stay in the uninteresting past, they try in various ways to keep up with the ever-accelerating future. This view is confirmed by the results of research conducted in 28 countries of the European region on ageism. 34% of people experienced age discrimination. In all the studied countries, stereotyping by age took place in different ways. Older people were most likely to be disrespected, ignored and patronized [Abrams et al., 2011]. This phenomenon is probably caused by several elements. One of the factors is the dominant cult of individualism manifested in self-care and the omnipresent technological progress that indirectly generates a rush for wealth. Ubiquitous consumerism has a significant impact on Europeans who lack deeply entrenched traditions. Human behavior is dictated by satisfying one's own needs, which is not conducive to caring for the elderly people [Arciszewska et al., 2017].

The results of research on the perception of older people in society in Asian culture are not clear. The countries of Asia are characterized by significant cultural distinctness from the rest of the world, which is based on Confucianism. It is worth taking a closer look at its main assumptions here. The philosopher emphasized the cultivation of traditional social dependence based on the family as the basic unit building the state and harmonious coexistence. He pointed to accepting his place in society and scrupulous fulfillment of duties, especially towards his own family [ibid., p. 74]. In Asian culture, care for older parents is not considered in the category of duty but of routine behavior, as evidenced by the term filial piety meaning the payment of a debt incurred in childhood [Benedict, 1999]. Respect for the elderly, tradition and family are evident in the studies of Nagasawa [1980] Sher [1984] and Wong [1979]. In turn, Koyano [1989] believes that ancestor worship is mostly a stereotype. Ikels and his colleagues [1992] make a similar statement, explaining that people of Asian descent perceive elderly people in the same way that Europeans do. And they indicate the functioning of negative stereotypes that include such aspects of the functioning of older people, such as; decreased physical fitness, lack of material stability and bad intergenerational relations. Meanwhile, moving on to slightly more contemporary authors [Arciszewska et al., 2017], attention is drawn to the fact that in

Korean, Japanese and Chinese speech there is a phenomenon of honoring the recipient, i.e. expressing respect through words. This means that the label requires the use of other phrases, for example in relation to an elderly person. It is worth mentioning that in Korean grammar there are 7 degrees of politeness, but in a conversation with a senior one should always use the most official form, which is to emphasize the respect shown [Ogarek-Czoj, Huszcza, and Gunn-Young Choy, 2007].

The social perception of the elderly in American culture varies. For example, the trait "good memory" is attributed to younger people than older people, and stereotypically people 50+ are perceived as not very creative, unable to learn new things, unproductive, burdening the family and society, and also as sick, weak, dependent, lonely and socially isolated [Hummert, Garstka, Shaner and Strahm, 1994]. It is worth emphasizing that older representatives of Western societies are educated, often have intellectual work, yet they are identified with maladjustment, awkwardness and poor orientation. Perhaps this is because the world of Westerners is changing extremely quickly, and there has been a gap between what today's seniors learned when they were young and what they are dealing with today [Sorokowski et al., 2017]. On the other hand, according to Kornadt and Rothermund [2011], people aged 50+ are positively assessed in the context of activities such as: family, partnerships, religion, work and employment, while negative assessments of older people refer to activities related to making friends, spending free time, engaging and physical and mental health. In terms of intergenerational communication, it has been noticed that younger people tend to over-adjust to older people, are too polite, warm and ideologically correct. While people 50+ are perceived as inattentive and closed. Additionally, research [Sorokowski et al., 2017] showed that Western society perceives older women less favorably than men. The status of senior women is also much lower. It should be assumed that the differences in the upbringing of men and women may be responsible for this state of affairs.

SUMMARY

Scientists [Mead, 1978] most often present two types of cultural coexistence of generations. The first - a conservative model of post-figurative culture, assumes the transfer of traditions, values, cultural behaviors and social roles to the younger generation by the generation of parents and grandparents, they are authorities personifying the immutability of the world order and stability. The second model of cofigurative culture assumes a generational coexistence, parents retain their authority, but their children are open to changes and can interpret new cultural phenomena better than their parents. One of the important factors influencing the cultural differences in the perception of older people in Euro-

pean, Asian and American countries are the accepted and established stereotypes. Difficult tasks arise today for the generation of older people around the world. One of them is the need to adapt to the changing civilization conditions, the other is concern for the protection of the existing cultural heritage and taking actions for its duration and survival. Christopher Dawson [1993] emphasizes that "culture is the name given to the social legacy of man - everything that people have learned from the past through the process of imitation, upbringing and learning, and everything that they passed on in the same way to their descendants and heirs" [p. 52].

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