

Indian Journal of Gerontology

2020, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 333–342

ISSN: 0971–4189, UGC, Care List, Science

Ageism among Undergraduate Students: Do Grandparents make a Difference?

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ABSTRACT

In an era of greying population, the idea of discriminating against people based on their chronological age is nothing less than absurd. The psychological insecurity sprouting from the anxiety about ageing paired with multiple factors often paves the way to ageism. The current research aims at investigating if the experience of living with grandparents has any significant influence on reducing ageism among undergraduate students. A self-reported questionnaire was employed among 194 students in the age group 17–22 from three colleges of Kasaragod district, Kerala to collect demographic data and The Fraboni Scale of Ageism was employed to measure ageism among the respondents and the mean score of those who were living with/had lived with their grandparents was compared with those who had never lived with their grandparents. The results of the study show that those respondents who live with their grandparents or have lived with their grandparents in the past had significantly lower ageism scores than those who had never resided with their grandparents. Further, the study could find that the awareness programmes on ageing and old age are not adequately available to young people and the awareness programmes that are provided are not efficient enough to eliminate ageism, as the data suggests. The study points to the importance of

inter-generational living in eliminating ageist notions and the need for effective awareness programmes.

Keywords: Ageism, Ageing, Intergenerational Contact, Youth and Older Adults.

Ageism had been a deep-rooted practice in the human civilisation which people or other entities commit consciously or through culturally transformed stereotypes. The idea and practice of discriminating older adults solely due to their chronological age had been existent from time immemorial. It was not until 1969, that the idea was brought forth to the academic circles by Butler. The practices that were often held as practical jokes or common notions were gradually deciphered to be grounded on a set of psycho-social elements. "Age-ism reflects a deep-seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged – a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, "uselessness," and death." (Butler, 1969, p. 243). The concept and practice of ageism, henceforth, became a topic of academic interest among sociologists, psychologists, and gerontologists.

Broadly speaking, "Ageism is defined as stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination against (but also in favour of) people because of their chronological age." (Ayalon & Tesch-Rome, 2017, p. 1). Ageism could either be implicit or explicit and could take place at micro, meso or macrolevel (Iversen, *et al.*, 2009). Ageism could be seen in unintentional day to day events of life to policy level deliberations, which is no less than intentional. An international policy level scenario could be seen in the case of the United Nations policy that ensures the rights of individuals devoid of their race, colour, sex or any other distinction through the United Nations (1948) but the document has not taken into account the discrimination based on age; at least in the official document (Megret, 2011). A broader picture of the discrimination of older adults in terms of national spending could be figured out through the resource allocation of the nations. India which is home to 10 per cent of the global senior population is spending less than one per cent of its GDP on schemes benefiting the older people (Helpage India, 2014). But the scenario is different in some of the developed

nations like Germany where 3.8 per cent of the GDP had been spent on the health care benefits of the elderly in 2003 and the spending is expected to rise to 8.4 per cent by 2040 (Jackson, 2003).

Origins and Transmission of Ageism

Ageism reflects a human person's inner fear of becoming old and the consequent reality of death, which is socially constructed and transmitted. (Butler, 1969; Popham, *et al.*, 2011 and Teater & Chonody, 2015). From a societal perspective, often ageist ideas are transferred through generations at a very young age, as low as fourth grade (Seefeldt, 1984). The idea and practice of ageism are prevalent in most of the societies and the concept is transferred and established through messages that influence people of all age groups (Teater & Chonody, 2015). The fact that the concept of ageism is psychologically constructed and socially transmitted and socially reinforced points to the fact the young people should need to identify the problem of ageism and avoid such practices deliberately.

The cultural nature of ageism raises the question of the difference in the trends of ageism in the context of cultural differences across societies. Often gerontocratic culture and piety do not necessarily vouch for the prevention of ageism. (Sharps, *et al.*, 1998). However, intergenerational contact is considered an effective strategy in reducing ageism among young people; ranging from children to middle-aged people (Peacock & Talley, 1984; Smith, *et al.*, 2016). Intergenerational contact is hence considered as one of the effective means of eliminating ageism among young people.

The Cultural Milieu and the Possibilities of Intergenerational Contacts

The nature of the interactions between young people and older adults are shaped by many factors; culture is one of the most important. It is found that "grandparents still maintain a respected authority role, especially in many Asian, African, and Latin American societies" (Hossain, *et al.*, 2018). However, this does not necessarily warrant a positive attitude toward older adults. Young people, among all age groups, are often found to be ageist than other people as found through researches among college students (Kimuna, *et al.* 2005). This

trend is found to be associated with a lack of ample interaction with older adults (Knapp, & Stubblefield, 2000; Kimuna, *et al.*, 2005). On the contrary, it is found that interactions with older adults, particularly grandparents, have a positive impact on the attitudes of young people towards older adults. (Flamion, *et al.*, 2017).

The traditional Indian culture is often termed gerontocratic or one marked by filial piety. In the traditional cultural milieu of India, it is believed that the children are obliged to provide for the aged parents. (Sarah, 2000). This culture is changing fast and the social role and importance that the older adults used to enjoy in the family system are gradually declining in the Indian context. This trend is reflected through the mushrooming of old age homes across India. The trend is alarming, particularly in the state of Kerala where 613 old age homes (Social Justice Department, 2017) function in the private sector and 11 in the public sector (Social Justice Department, n.d.) sheltering around twenty thousand older adults. A finding that shall be read along comes from a 2002 study in Kerala which had found that 48 per cent of the inmates of old age homes had a living son and 41 per cent had a living daughter (Rajan, 2002). The cultural scenario is drastically changing in the Indian context, particularly in the state of Kerala when it comes to the lives of older adults. Older adults no longer enjoy the benefits of social acceptance as they used to enjoy during the times of intergenerational living. It is against this background that the study was carried out among undergraduate students of three colleges from Kasargod district. The study aimed at investigating if the undergraduate students who live with/had lived with their grandparents had significantly lower ageism than their colleagues who had never lived with their grandparents.

Method

The current research has been carried as a cross-sectional descriptive study among the students of three colleges in Kasargod district offering undergraduate courses. Three Arts and Science and colleges in the district were randomly selected and voluntary participants from the undergraduate departments of these colleges were sampled. The convenience sample consisted of 194 students (64, 65 and

65 respectively) from three colleges of Kasaragod district in the age group 17–22. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymity was assured to the participants. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the study and it was made sure that the study followed the IFSW Code of Ethics. The data about significant variables were collected using a self-reported questionnaire containing questions related to relevant demographic details and the Fraboni Scale of Ageism (Fraboni, Saltstone, & Hughes, 1990). A higher score in the Fraboni Scale of Ageism indicates higher levels of ageism. The internal consistency reliability of the Fraboni Scale of Ageism in this study was found to be 0.707 (Cronbach's α) implying a desirable level of internal consistency. The data obtained were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of SPSS 25.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Details of the Respondents

<i>Age Group of the Respondents</i>		
<i>Age</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
17–18	100	51.5
19–20	24	12.4
21–22	70	36.1
Total	194	100
Distribution of the Respondents based on Sex		
Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	76	39.2
Female	118	60.8
Total	194	100
Academic Course of the Respondents		
Nature of Course	Frequency	Percentage
Science and Allied Courses	122	62.886
Social Sciences and Humanities	72	37.113

Table 2
Distribution of Respondents based on Exposure to live with Grandparents and Corresponding Ageism Score

<i>Exposure to Life with Grandparents (Present or Past)</i>					
<i>Life with Grandparents</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>
Yes	41	21.1	51.2927	5.144	-11.94261
No	153	78.9	63.2353	6.43	
Total	194	100			

Among the 194 respondents, 21.1 percentage (41 samples) had either lived or were living with their grandparents and the rest 78.9 percentage (153 samples) had never lived with their grandparents in the same home; those who were/are making casual visits to the grandparents and not living with/was not living with grandparents were excluded from the category. Considering the current trend of nuclear families, the number of respondents with exposure to life with grandparents was reasonable. Further, it was evident that the respondents who had either lived or were living with their grandparents had lower ageism scores on the Fraboni Scale of Ageism (Mean Score = 51.29) when compared to that of those with no exposure to a life with grandparents (Mean Score = 63.23), accounting for a mean difference of 11.94 in the scores.

Table 3
Significance of the Difference in the Ageism Scores based on Exposure to live with Grandparents

<i>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (Equal Variances Assumed)</i>		<i>T-Test for Equality of Means</i>		
<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>
3.286	0.071	-10.97	192	0.000

An independent samples t-test was done to determine the significance in the difference of ageism score between the respondents with exposure to life with grandparents and those without such exposure. Outliers were not present as shown by a boxplot. The condition of normality of distribution was satisfied as per the Shapiro Wilks test (at

$p = 0.05$). Homogeneity of variance was also satisfied as per Levene's Test for Equality of variance, $p = 0.071$ (at 0.05). The result suggests that the participants who had exposure to live with their grandparents had significantly lower ageism score (51.29 ± 5.14) than those who had no such exposure (63.23 ± 6.43), $p = 0.000$.

The result suggests that intergenerational living or living with grandparents can significantly influence the attitudes of young people towards older adults. However, it cannot be practically suggested as a solution to eliminating ageism, but as a practical alternative spending more time with grandparents could be suggested so that young people be exposed to interactions with older adults. As the duration and quality of interaction are more, less likely is the ageism among young people.

Table 4
Distribution of Respondents Based on Exposure to Awareness Programmes on Old Age

<i>Distribution of Respondents Based on Exposure to Awareness Programmes on Old Age</i>					
<i>Awareness Programmes Received on Old Age</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>
Yes	78	40.2	59.5513	8.21884	-1.9401
No	116	59.8	61.4914	7.57168	
Total	194	100			

Among the 194 respondents, 78 (40.2%) had received some form of awareness programmes on old age and ageing and had a mean ageism score of 59.55 ± 8.21 . On the other hand, 116 respondents (59.8%) had received no awareness programmes whatsoever on old age and ageing and had a mean ageism score of 61.4914 ± 7.57 . The difference in the mean scores of the two categories was found not to be significantly different as suggested by an independent samples t-test.

The finding points to the inadequacy of awareness creation through academic means or educational institutions towards the cause of elimination of ageism. Though education or awareness programmes are effective in eliminating or decreasing ageism among young people (Cottle, & Glover, 2007; Sum, *et al.*, 2016), education or awareness creation programmes received by the respondents of this study were

found to be making no marked difference. This points to the need for some form of efficient interventions among the student community to provide insights on ageing, ageism, and the need for positive attitudes towards older adults.

Conclusion

Ageism, despite this era being one of greying of the population, it is still rampant in the society at large. This discrimination of people based on their age is to be taken into consideration seriously. The explicit forms of age-based discrimination at macro and meso levels starts right from the cultural context of one's childhood and progresses through adulthood. Intergenerational exposure through quality time with grandparents could be a feasible solution to avoid this. Intervention strategies focusing on this aspect could help in eliminating ageist trends. Despite older adults being a considerable proportion of the global population, the educational system does not give adequate attention to the need for eliminating discriminatory beliefs and practices against older adults. This shall be addressed as well with proper education programs and awareness creation through educational institutions. In the upcoming years of the greying population, older adults should be treated as equals to their younger counterparts.

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