DESERT ISLAND: THE INTER-GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

BEZLUDNA WYSPA: WSPÓLNE MIĘDZYPOKOLENIOWE PRZEŻYCIE OCZAMI MŁODYCH DOROSŁYCH

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Summary: Since the 1960s the popular culture discourse has set firm boundaries between age groups in the society. The domination of youth, disseminated by the mass media, has taken root in the western culture and the elderly have found themselves marginalised. As a result, the communication between the young and the old has been limited and the mutual perception of each other has become more and more negatively stereotypical, according to many researchers.

This paper attempts to find out to what extent the aforementioned attitudes impinge on the consciousness of Polish young adults and in what terms they describe their relations with the elderly. In order to answer these questions, a writing task, describing an imaginary situation involving both the young and the old, was performed by a group of college students in Sandomierz aged 20-23. The compositions were analysed in search of age stereotypes, social role perceptions and communication modes between generations.

Keywords: young, old, stereotype, relation, communication

Streszczenie: Od lat sześćdziesiątych ubiegłego wieku kultura popularna stawia wyraźne granice pomiędzy grupami wiekowymi w społeczeństwie. Dominacja młodości, rozpowszechniana przez środki masowego przekazu, na dobre zagnieździła się w zachodniej kulturze, częstokroć marginalizując osoby w podeszłym wieku. W rezultacie, w opinii wielu badaczy, porozumienie między młodymi a starymi ulega ograniczeniu i przybiera coraz bardziej negatywnie nacechowane formy.

Niniejszy artykuł próbuje stwierdzić, do jakiego stopnia wspomniane wyżej zjawiska odciskają się na świadomości polskich młodych dorosłych, oraz w jaki sposób opisują oni relacje z pokoleniem swych dziadków. Aby spróbować odpowiedzieć na te pytania, grupa słuchaczy Nauczycielskiego Kolegium Języków Obcych w Sandomierzu, w wieku 20 – 23 lata, została poproszona o napisanie wypracowania w języku angielskim, opisującego wyobrażoną sytuację, w której uczestniczyli młodzi i starzy ludzie. Wypracowania zostały przeanalizowane pod kątem obecności stereotypów związanych z wiekiem, przedstawienia ról społecznych oraz sposobów porozumiewania się pomiędzy pokoleniami.

Słowa kluczowe: młody, stary, stereotyp, relacja, porozumienie

Introduction

As Western societies age, their elderly become not only more and more numerous but also healthier, better educated and more affluent. This trend starts being noticed mainly by marketing specialists (Hartman 2012), (Calasanti et al. 2012), but the popular culture is still focused on the young as it has been since the 1960's. In words of Todd Nelson (Nelson 2011):

Anyone who has been exposed to Western culture quickly learns that there is a culture bias in favour of youth. Movies, television, magazines and advertisers who support those media, all cater for the young.

Such attitude gives rise to different forms of ageism, which, according to reports (Power 1987), (Ray, Robinson 2011), is experienced by more than one third of the elderly. They are discriminated against at the workplace (employers do not want to employ people over 50, older employees are believed to be unable to cope with new technologies, etc.), suffer unfair treatment in encounters with officialdom, medical and social services as well as with the members of the public and their own families. They are underrepresented and negatively portrayed in the media, particularly television, film and the Internet. Flourishing of anti-ageing and plastic surgery industries reflects the desperate attempts undertaken by people from all walks of

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life to stop the stigmatizing visible symptoms of the ageing process (Calasanti et al. 2012), (Hurd Clarke 2011).

Ageism is fed by stereotypes and stereotypes seem to be convenient shortcuts willingly taken by both creators and consumers of contemporary popular culture through its flood of information. Stereotypes can be positive or negative and the stereotype of the old tends to be negative in the popular discourse. The features the most commonly attributed to the elderly are: inactive, useless, needy, weak, sickly, forgetful, exceedingly religious, not able to learn new things, set in their ways, grumpy and complaining (Walker 2013).

It is the young people who are the most influenced by the stereotypes due to their lack of experience and considerable exposure to the media and advertising. It is also the young who hold the most radical and critical views on the older generations. It seems therefore interesting to know what the attitudes of Polish young people are in this respect.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to find out how the Polish young adults (aged 20-23) relate to the elderly and how far the popular stereotypes of old age influence their perception of the old.

Materials and methods

The study was conducted in the last week of May 2013 on a group of 41 students of the Foreign Language Teacher training College in Sandomierz, (30 girls and 11 boys). The students, training to be teachers of English were between 20 and 23 years old. In their writing class they were given the following writing task (in English): " Imagine you are shipwrecked on a desert island – just you and your grandparents or some other elderly couple over 60. Write an account of your stay there in 250-500 words." They had 60 minutes to complete the task. The intention was to invent a situation where the young people had to imagine themselves cooperating closely with the elderly and where they would concentrate on the task rather than on ready made answers, so that their genuine attitude towards the elderly was revealed, in a way, as a 'by-product'. Majority of the participants wrote their accounts in the form of a diary. The content of the accounts was coded into three main categories:
1. Reactions to the situation,
2. Activities on the desert island,
3. The interaction between the young person and the elderly couple.

Results

1. Reaction to the situation.

The most frequent reaction to the situation was being shocked/scared then crying/complaining followed by anxious and angry, but also calm, reassuring or even optimistic and happy. Different reactions were attributed to the young person and the elderly people. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the reactions.

Table 1. Reactions to the situation

reaction	old man	old woman	young person
shocked/scared/panicky	22%	37.5%	59.5%
anxious/worried	2.5%	12%	12%
crying/complaining	7.5%	30%	15%
angry	2.5%	5%	12%
depressed	2.5%	7.5%	2.5%
calm/controlling emotions	25%	25%	7.5%
reassuring/consoling others	25%	30%	12%
optimistic	10%	2.5%	2.5%
happy	10%	7.5%	7.5%
active	10%	5%	0%

Most of the young people described their own reaction as shocked or scared (59.5%) compared with 22% of old men and 37% of old women. Still, it was mainly old women (30%) who reacted with crying and complaining to the shipwreck, they were also more prone to being depressed (7.5%) than old men and young people (both 2.5%). Only 2.5% of old men and 5% of old women reacted with anger, while 12% of the young felt the emotion. Many more old people of both sexes (25%) stayed calm or controlled emotions in the face of the misfortune, compared to 7.5% of the young. It was mainly the elderly who tried to reassure and comfort the others (25% of old men and 30% of old women). Only 12% of the young people tried to support the seniors, in particular the elderly woman. Old people, especially the men (10%), took an active attitude in the plight, while none of the young people got involved in an immediate search for a way out of the predicament. Similarly, mostly old men (10%) retained an optimistic outlook compared with old women and young people (both 2.5%). Some old men were slightly more happy (10%) than the old women and young people (both 7.5%) because of the situation.

2. Activities on the desert island

Table 2 presents the activities which the students imagined their characters to perform on the desert island.

Table 2. Activities on the desert island

activity	old man	old woman	young person
constructing a shelter/ boat/tools	57%	22.5%	37%
picking fruit/other kinds of food	42.5%	35%	52.5%
making a fire	27.5%	10%	5%
fishing	20%	5%	12%
fetching firewood	17.5%	7.5%	25%
exploring the island	17.5%	5%	17.5%
hunting	12%	0	10%
cooking	10%	32.5%	5%
being ill/not feeling well	5%	12%	7.5%

The most often mentioned activities were building a shelter and making a fire. It was mainly the old men that were imagined as making a fire (27.5%), compared with 10% of old women and 5% of the young people. Construction jobs like making a shelter, building a boat or raft, making tools were attributed mostly to old men (57%), but young people (37%) and old women (22.5%) also participated in the task. It was often described as a joint effort. Hunting was not frequently mentioned and it was performed by old men (12%) and young people (10%). Fishing seemed a more obvious activity, again, the most often done by old men (20%) or young people (12%) rather than old women (5%). Picking fruit and gathering food appeared the most popular activity with all categories and it was the activity that majority of the young characters were involved into (52.5% of the young people, 42.5% of the old men, 35% of the old women). The young people were good at fetching firewood (25%), which was also common with old men (17.5%) and less so with old women (7.5%). The same number of old men and young people explored the island (17.5%) contrasted with only 5% of old women. Cooking and preparing food was assigned mainly to the old women (32.5%) but more old men (10%) than young people (5%) performed the task. Being ill, injured or not feeling well was associated mostly, although not frequently, with old women (12%) and more often with young people (7.5%) than old men (5%).

3. Interaction between the old and the young

Vast majority of the participants (92.5) described the relationship between the elderly couple and the young person in positive terms. Only 2.5% of the young characters revealed a negative, even hostile, attitude to the elderly, 2.5% described mutual inability to communicate, with 2.5% it was the elderly who showed hostility towards the young person. 15% of the young characters showed initial uneasiness about the elderly people and the prospect of spending time with them.

The students' accounts yielded the following categories of interaction between the elderly couple and the young person: cooperation, lack of cooperation, negotiating/taking decisions together, taking charge, having fun together, improvement of the relationship with grandparents/old people in general. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of the categories.

Table 3. Interaction between the old and the young

interaction	old man	old woman	young person
cooperation	95%	95%	95%
lack of cooperation	5%	5%	5%
negotiating/taking decisions together	12%	12%	12%
taking charge	25%	10%	5%
improvement of the relationship between the old and the young			37%
having fun together	20%	20%	20%

Most students (95%) described the relations of the three people as friendly and cooperative. It refers to the attitude of the elderly towards the young person and vice versa although a considerable number of the young characters (15%) feels initial uneasiness about the elderly people. In all accounts the elderly couple stick together and often their relationship is described as loving and caring. In some papers there is a conflict between the spouses, usually initiated or caused by the women. Still, this does not prevent some kind of cooperation. Only 2 of the stories present a totally negative relationship between the young person and the old couple. In one of them the young person is friendly and helpful while the elderly are demanding, lazy and ungrateful towards the young one. In the other, the young person shows hostility and cruelty to the elderly companions.

In 25% of the stories the old man is given the role of the leader. He organizes activities and tells others what to do. It is connected with his knowledge, experience and skills. In 10% of the cases it is the old woman who takes charge and has the necessary know-how. The young person becomes the leader or the main agent in 5% of the stories, majority of which describe the hostile relationship.

In 12% of the accounts the activities are talked over and decisions are taken jointly by the three

protagonists. In the remaining cases the question of leadership is not clearly stated. Many students (37%) describe the relationship between the young and the old as evolving from the initial uneasiness or indifference to a much closer one, including lasting friendship and re-kindled family love.

In a number of stories the characters not only cooperate in order to survive, but also enjoy each other's company and have fun together, singing, dancing, playing instruments or talking.

The language the students put in the mouths of their alter egos referring to the elderly is on the whole positive and complimentary. The old people are described as brave (almost in all papers), wise, clever, brilliant, creative, tough and strong. They are also called polite, gentle, caring and helpful. Their experience and skills are appreciated: ' My grandma is the best chef ever', 'Who can fish better than your grandpa?' and so is their perseverance: ' They never give up'. The only paper revealing a hostile attitude to the elderly on the part of the young person uses aggressive and demeaning expressions. The elderly are called: 'imitations of humans', 'fat', 'slow', 'full of physical diseases'.

The image of the elderly

The image of the elderly emerging from the Desert Island task is, with two exceptions, very far from the popular stereotype of the old. The elderly men are presented almost like superheroes: 'my brave grandfather', 'My grandfather was a strong man', 'Granddad was a tough man.' or even: ' My grandfather killed a lion with his bare hands'. In the face of the catastrophe, they are calm and control their emotions, support emotionally their wives and the young person and comfort them: 'We'll cope somehow, we just have to cooperate.', 'Something told me that I can feel safe because they are with me.' The old men think positively and are ready to take some action immediately. In most cases it is them that take charge of the group showing decisiveness and considerable leadership skills: ' He did not allow me to go to the wreck', ' He ordered us not to split', 'He started giving orders'. They are practical and have a lot of useful skills: they can make a fire, find food, fish, hunt, build a shelter, a boat or a raft, repair a radio. They explore the island, think of ways to get rescued from the plight.

Old women worry more, but they also do not lose their heads. They think of others first comforting the young ones. Like their husbands, they are practical and resourceful. They find and pick fruit, cook food, make a fire and keep it burning, participate in building the shelter and other activities (catching fish with their hands). In some cases they become the leaders of the group. They are presented as caring and nurturing personalities. Still, they are more passive than the old men and in papers describing some conflict situations, it is more often the woman

that causes it. The women are also more frequently presented as having health problems.

The elderly can successfully deal with the physical survival on the island, usually taking care of the young person. They also stand for high moral values (with a few exceptions) and spirituality, which are admired by the young people. They disinterestedly share what they have with the young person, even if the young person is a stranger. Many of the elderly couples show deep affection for each other. One student writes: 'I hope that one day I'll meet someone who will love me for good and bad as Mr Brown loved his wife.' The elderly people value family life, they tell the young person the family history or talk about their children and grandchildren or about their past.

Contrary to the initial worries expressed by the young people, the elderly turn out to be fascinating companions for the young: they can talk about music, remember their wild young days, sing and joke together with the young person. The young find their company rewarding. The students make the following statements: 'We felt like a family.', 'I learn a lot from him (grandfather)', 'Thanks to them, we survived the hard time.', 'Luckily my grandpa was there.', 'They are my idols.', 'My grandparents are more creative than me.'

Only one student presented the elderly people as unfriendly, greedy and lazy. In this story it is the young person who successfully organizes his/her life on the island while the idle old ones steal his/her food and take advantage of his/her resourcefulness not even thanking him/her afterwards. Another exception is a story where the elderly people and the young person cooperate to survive but their communication fails: they do not understand each other's jokes, the elderly people are not familiar with the 'cultural references', as the author puts it, used by the young one, and generally they cannot accept each other's ways, both parties sticking to their deeply rooted prejudice.

There have been numerous surveys carried out in Europe, (Power 1987), (Ray, Robinson 2011), the USA and Australia which investigate the situation of the elderly. The intergenerational relations have also been researched. The most comprehensive one is the European Social Survey commissioned by Age UK conducted in 28 European Union countries. All of them show a great cleft between the old and the young. Not only have they very little in common – 80% of the people aged 15-24 have no friends over 70 – but also the social groups are perceived as separate within the same community. This perception, being present among all European nations is the strongest in Poland and Czech Republic (60% of the surveyed admitted this). The findings were confirmed by the surveys in Australia and the USA. The young and the elderly live separately and they know little about each other apart from individual encounters within the family. Both groups hold rather negative opinion

on the other. They fully realize their mutual distrust, (Ray, Robinson 2011).

The analysis of the Desert Island study only partly complies with the above findings. Just 15% of the students mention initial uneasiness and anxiety on the part of the young person. The young people are worried that they will be bored in the company of the seniors or they will not know what to talk about with them. 37% describe a great improvement in their relationship with the elderly and getting much closer to them resulting from the experience. They write: 'I will never allow myself to ignore my family again.', 'I realized how much I loved my grandparents', 'I understand how important my grandparents are in my life'. Some of the stories where the characters were not relatives end in establishing a lasting friendship between the elderly people and the young person. The Desert Island study clearly shows that the young adults are ready to accept the authority of the elders, especially of the elderly males. The young characters in the stories often (35%) carry out the orders of the elderly, accept them as leaders and ask them for instructions: ' I was very hungry, so I asked them what to do'. Polish researchers like Bożena Krupa point out that despite the overall negative perception of the elderly as such, Polish young people tend to see the seniors as 'providers'. She claims that due to the economic crisis, it is the old people who, thanks to their limited but stable income, provide their children and grandchildren with housing, financial support and baby sitting services as long as possible, (Krupa 2012). This characteristic is also evident in the results of the Desert Island. Most of the students described the elderly couple as providing support and services to the young ones, who, in some cases, actually expected them to do so, like in the following example: 'Day 4. Today my grandmother didn't bring me breakfast. I was very surprised, so I asked her what happened.' The same author reveals completely dependent attitude: 'I'm really scared. What will I do if they die?'

Stereotypes

As far as the influence of the stereotypes is concerned, it should be mentioned that there functions a variety of stereotypes, both scientifically described and popularly widespread in the media. Stereotypes are fixed, overgeneralized beliefs about a particular group or class of people. Stereotypes are usually negative and add to the discriminative practices. The less first hand experience, the stronger the stereotypes, and as the aforementioned European Social Survey shows, such experience is scarce between the generations (Ray, Robinson 2011).

According to Fiske's stereotype content model, social prestige is formed by the convergence of two factors: warmth and competence. People marked high on competence enjoy the highest social prestige, those marked low on both are not respected socially

(e.g. the homeless). Measured against the two characteristics, the stereotypical old people are placed high on warmth and low on competence, which results in being pitied rather than envied or evoking pride. The European Social Survey (Ray, Robinson 2011) uses four characteristics: friendliness, competence, having high moral standards, being viewed with respect. People aged over 70 are the least likely to be attributed competence, particularly in Poland, which is at the bottom of the list in this category. Here the findings of the Desert Island study go against the report's. With two exceptions, the elderly are seen as extremely competent at survival skills, both theoretical and practical. They are not only competent, but much more competent than the young adults in the situation. The elderly have both the knowledge and the skills. A student writes: ' I found a bird with a broken wing. I took it to my grandma and she killed it.'

In the European Survey the elderly win the admiration for scoring high on the friendliness and high moral values (Ray, Robinson 2011). The Desert Island study is in full agreement with the opinion. On the whole, the elderly characters are kind, supportive and helpful. With two exceptions they offer help to the young person, even when they are strangers. Their moral standards vary in the stories: some of them are quarrelsome or even violent, in one case the elderly are depicted as arrogant, dishonest and selfish, but on the whole they represent positive qualities like maintaining long lasting loving relationships, interest in their families as well as interest in history and religion.

Popular stereotypes of the elderly are much less favourable. The set of features usually attributed to the elderly in the popular discourse comprises the following: dependent, inactive, needy, weak, sickly, depressive, useless, exceedingly religious, not being able to learn new things, set in their ways, forgetful, (Walker 2010), (Chechelski 2007). This widespread and reinforced by the media stereotype echoes in the Desert Island task. 12% of the old women and 5% of the old men demonstrate poor health and need medication. A few stories describe old people (more often old women) as complaining, quarrelsome and initiating conflict in the group. Stereotypically, the young people imagine the old as predominantly interested in the past and willingly talking about it. The elderly are openly religious, many of the old women pray, and, in one case, the elderly couple spend time discussing religious topics, but the preoccupation with religion in Deseret Island stories is far from excessive. In accord with the stereotype, the old people are, more than the young ones, happy to be away from civilization; only one old woman is presented missing her favourite TV soap operas, while the young characters often complain on being deprived of their electronic gadgets.

The stereotypes which are the easiest to notice in the Desert Island papers are the ones connected with the male and female social roles. In fact, the

image of the relationships in the students' stories is extremely patriarchal. The males are more active and more often take the lead, telling the others what to do and how to do it. The old males engage in activities stereotypically considered masculine: constructing and repairing things, fishing, hunting, exploration. The males control their emotions and provide support for the females. The women are mainly preoccupied with finding, preparing and serving food. They are often passive, they refuse to leave the camp and explore the island. They are motherly and caring, particularly towards the young people. The show physical weakness and are more emotional. In fact, the overall picture of the elderly in the study largely denies the negative stereotype of the elderly. However, one has to be careful to draw conclusions. The findings of Bożena Krupa, who researched the attitudes of Polish young people, indicate that there are two parallel views on the old widespread among the young: the popular negative stereotype and a positive one, called 'the caring grandparent': wise, warm, loving and caring, connected with the aforementioned view of the elderly as 'providers', (Krupa 2012). As the situation in the Desert Island study was difficult for the young people to handle, the young characters assumed the role of children and exploited the 'caring grandparent' stereotype.

Conclusion

It is impossible to venture a clear-cut interpretation of the Desert Island task, as it has some serious weaknesses. First of all, the number of participants was small. Secondly, the situation itself was favourable for the elderly: the older generation members were more likely to know how to make a fire, fish and do without electronic gadgets. Thirdly, it would have been useful to check the young people's opinions on the elderly by means of a questionnaire and then compare the findings. Finally, the findings might have been more objective if the young people were to imagine a confrontation with strangers, not their own grandparents. Still, the results seem quite interesting, as they have disproved my expectations that the young people see themselves as agents and leaders in the face of a challenge. In the study, they preferred to step back and pass the lead into the hands of the elders. I believed more students would feel inclined to take care of the frail old or at least reveal irritation at their weaknesses and indolence. I think the findings, although imperfect, seem interesting not only from the point of view of cultural studies. The imaginary situation as described by the young people could be of interest for sociologists and psychologists as well.

The only generalization that can be made here, is that the young adults, on the threshold of independent lives still value the support and guidance of their elders, although subconsciously they agree with the popular culture stereotypes of the aged.

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