Attitudes of Children Toward Older Persons: What They Are, What They Can Be

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Article:

Ageism, a negative attitude toward older persons, a fear of growing old, is an integral part of U.S. culture today Butler, 1975). Attitudes of children and adults toward older persons have varied across cultures with time. In cultures where few reached old age, where older persons owned the land or the means of production, acted as religious or political figures, and were the bearers of knowledge, they were respected and powerful despite senescence. In industrialized societies, where many persons attain old age, attitudes toward older persons have tended to be more negative (Barrow, 1979).

Gruman (1978) reported that the roots of ageism in our culture can be traced to the close of the frontier at the beginning of this century. Goals shifted to a strong aggressive nation conquering weaknesses at home and new territories abroad. Immigration quotas "were established that limited the entry of older persons into the United States. Early research on older persons concentrated on those living on poor farms and in mental hospitals (i.e., the impaired elderly). This increased the negative attitudes in a society already oriented toward youth and productivity.

In the words of Katz (1978):

> Kinship ties, maintenance of age-related traditions, respect of knowledge and wisdom of the aged have all been associated with high status for the elderly and positive feelings about growing old. However, under modern conditions of rapid increases in the relative and absolute numbers of the aged, and a general decline in extended kinship systems, it is not surprising to find a pre-dominant negative perception about the prospects of growing old regardless of culture. (p. 7)

Most people today accept the fact that ageism is present in our culture (Barrow & Smith, 1979). Culture is a dynamic and changing reality, how-ever. The Protestant work ethic and the value of productivity and youth are no longer unquestionable absolutes, Are ageist attitudes changing, and where might such changes be noticed? No one really knows when attitudes develop; however, it appears that values and attitudes developed early in life are those that are more lasting over time. Early learning appears to color one's perception of all that is learned subsequently (Henderson, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon, 1978).

Stereotypes of aging and the elderly such as decline in intelligence with age, inability to learn with advanced age, and absolute senility with age (second childhood) have become pervasive throughout all age and socioeconomic levels in U.S. society (Harris & Cole, 1980). Ageism has been deeply rooted in American culture; however, the term was only recently coined in 1968 by Butler (Butler, 1975). The negativism with which the elderly are currently viewed has resulted in an increased awareness of the stereotypical and ageist beliefs held by many Americans. The ageism issue becomes critical when one considers that the rapidly approaching zero population birth rate will continue to decrease the ratio of young persons to older persons in our population, thus producing an increased need for reducing ageism and old age stereotypes among children and youth. This and other demo-graphic shifts coupled with the negative attitudes already held by many per-sons toward the elderly add emphasis to the need for early intervention designed to educate youth regarding the facts of old age and the positive developments as well as the decrements associated with it. Currently more than 11%, or more than 20 million Americans are over 65 years of age, and during the coming century the proportion

may reach one person in five, or 20% of the population (Neugarten 1964). This projection, made 17 years ago, has been verified by 1980 census data and projections (United States Bureau of the Census, 1981).

While all persons may be responsible for originating and transmitting many of the negative attitudes regarding older persons to children, children are nevertheless responsible persons and if exposed to older persons without ageist adult or media input, may revere and respect older persons (Whitley 1976).

This article describes children 5 to11 years) and adolescents' (12 to 17 years) attitudes toward the elderly as reported in the literature, Also considered are some of the model projects and studies that have had an impact on the development or modification of these attitudes. Suggestions for future programs, strategies, and attempts to change attitudes toward the elderly are developed relative to reported research, and model projects. The role of the school counselor in ameliorating negative attitudes and stereotypes toward older persons during the early school years can become a significant factor in developing humanistic understanding of age and aging now and in future generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Very little data have been gathered and reported in the literature concerning children's attitudes toward older persons. A review of existing research revealed a lack of research studies on children (below adolescent age) in terms of attitudes held toward age and the aging. Salter & Salter (1976) studied attitudes toward aging in young people as a function of death anxiety. They found that those most afraid of their own deaths were also most afraid of their own aging. This fear did not appear to lead to ageism, however, or a rejection of the elderly as reported in this study. Robertson (1976) studied children's perceptions of grandparents as old-fashioned and out of touch. The aged were regarded as significant sources of influence on their grandchildren's lives. He also found that the young adults perceived definite responsibilities for their grandparent's welfare, care, and psychophysiological well-being.

In a study of adolescent literature, Peterson and Karnes (1976) found that older persons were underdeveloped and peripheral to the major action in the books reviewed. They reported that the aged characters bore a distinct cultural similarity to older persons in contemporary America, that is, "They are only partial people, they are not developed; they are not necessary to the real action that transpires about them," No major differences were found between older characters in books published earlier in this century and those published more recently. Brubaker and Powers (1976) reported that a distinction should be made between *generalized old* and *personalized old;* when researching stereotypes of the elderly. Generalized old were defined as those older persons unrelated to the subject while personalized old included those older persons who were family members.

Britton and Britton (1969) demonstrated that children's perceptions of the elderly were age related, As children progressed from four to six years of age, they became more aware of older persons and better able to identify them correctly. A study by Hickey 1968) with third grade students found socioeconomic differences in children's perceptions of age: Children from higher socioeconomic groups looked more favorably on older persons (although perceiving loneliness problems), and children from poorer homes did not anticipate loneliness but expected senility and eccentric behavior.

Jantz, Seefeldt, Caalper, and Serock (1976) developed the Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly (CATE), the most used instrument designed to assess children's attitudes toward the elderly and the aging process. The CATE was developed to examine the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of children's attitudes Uantz et al., 1976). The instrument was administered to 180 children from nursery school through sixth grade, with 20 children randomly selected from each grade level. Results suggested that:

1. Children of all ages have limited knowledge of and contact with older persons;

2. Children have few positive responses about growing old themselves, and do not perceive old age as positive;

3. Children of all ages up to the sixth grade were able to identify the oldest man in a series of photographs depicting men of different ages;

4. Attitudes of children toward older persons show a mixture of positive feelings and either stereotypic or negative attitudes about the physical aspects of age;

5. Children's concepts of age are significantly correlated with Piaget's conservation scores (Jantz et al,, 1976); and

6. Children's concepts of age increase in accuracy with increases in age.

This study was limited in that it was accomplished in a single school with a sample of 20 participants per grade.

In a study of the child's development of the concept of family, Moore (1977) found that only three-quarters of the children she studied (28 boys and girls at each of the three higher Piagetian levels) believed that an elderly couple was a family. Aiello (1976) studied the effects of crowding on children (9 to 16 years) and elderly adults (60 to 90 years), The results indicated that children had a greater increase in stress and annoyance following crowding than did elderly adults. In contrast, the elderly regarded the crowded room as cozier and reported less aggression and more friendliness in the crowded room. The crowding condition was accomplished by placing age segregated groups into small or large rooms and measuring stress level with skin conductance equipment while each group sat quietly for 30 minutes.

Brien (1980) studied children's attitudes toward aging and the elderly among kindergarten and third grade students. She used a personally developed 20-minute structured interview technique with 16 kindergarten and 10 third grade students from a single school and found that: (a) children had little contact with elderly persons; (b) ageism existed more toward the generalized elderly than toward the personalized elderly; (c) children often perceived the elderly as having little to do, with no specific function outside loving their grandchildren; and (d) children at kindergarten age fear old age because with it comes death. She postulated that a reduction in death taboo may facilitate a reduction in ageism. This study was limited by the single site, small sample size, and possible inherent bias in the interview instrument.

To summarize, literature presently available on children's attitudes toward the elderly appears to be concerned with the methods through which attitudes are transmitted; that is, media, family, or direct observation, the process by which this transmission occurs, and whether the attitudes are a function of differing life circumstances, perceptions, levels of awareness, or contact with older persons. Most studies found that children have little knowledge of or contact with older persons and that their perceptions of age and aging are generally negative .

MODEL PROJECTS
As death education (thanatology) gained popularity as a subject for study, aging (gerontology) became a subject of interest to educators. This is perhaps due largely to the increasing numbers of older persons in the population and increased funding (through the Administration on Aging) of programs for the aged, These developments, coupled with innovative programs begun by counselors and teachers, have produced several model approaches toward effecting attitudinal change toward the elderly. Basically, two environments have been used to develop programs designed to change attitudes: (a) older persons as caregivers to children, and (b) children as caregivers to older persons.

The ACTION program, Foster Grandparents, has been a highly successful national program since its inception in 1969 (Butler, 1975). It is directed toward low income older persons and provides care, attention, love, and role modeling for disadvantaged children. Typically, this program employs needy older persons, paying them the minimum hourly wage and providing them one meal per day, transportation to and from the service site, and an annual physical examination. These elderly persons work with disadvantaged, emotionally disturbed, or

mentally retarded children. The benefits for both young and old haw been demonstrated and the program is considered one of the most successful federal programs because it provides positive benefits in terms of activity, economic support, nutrition, mobility, physical wellness, and humanistic concern to two different groups, both in need and at risk (Atchley, 1980). In this program, the disadvantaged elderly foster grandparents receive a 40-hour training orientation for the specific tvpe of disadvantaged child they have chosen.

The seeming void in programming for nondisadvantaged children and older persons has been addressed by several innovative and unique programs including the Adopted Grandparents program in Gainesville, Florida and the Youth Elderly Services (YES) project in Long Beach, California initiated by school counselors and educators. One such program was begun in 1968 by Esstoya Whitley, who teaches at the P. K. Yonge Laboratory School of the University of Florida, Gainesville (Whitley, 1976). Ms. Whitley believed that the elderly were a rich learning resource, and her purpose was to tap this resource for the benefit of her 6- to 8-year-old students. As part of their school curriculum, the child volunteers to "adopt" a grandparent from among residents of a nearby nursing home who are physically unable to care for themselves. Through a program of regular visitation, the children gain increased contact with and understanding of the elderly. Further, they become sensitive to all aspects of the human life cycle, thus establishing realistic perceptions of development throughout the life span (Duncan, 1976). An initial, potentially negative, element in the program was the fear of nursing home residents that the children would visit only once or twice and not return. This has not proven to be the case, as the children have continued to visit their adopted grandparents through the ages of 6, 7, and 8 at least three times per week (Whitley, 1976). It was discovered that as talents are shared, respect and love are developed between children and the aged. The young interacted with the old, and experienced the death of some adopted grandparents in a positive setting. The loneliness that usually accompanies old age in an institution was, at least to some degree, dispelled in renewed feelings of usefulness through active contact with children. The children came to view growing old as just as much a part of life as growing up. Perhaps most significant was the positive attitude toward the elderly acquired by these children.

The YES program is sponsored by the University of Southern California's Andrus School of Gerontology in cooperation with the career education office of the Long Beach Unified School District. It was funded as a three-year demonstration model by the Administration on Aging and provides gerontological training and employment for high school students, in the homes of frail elderly residents of Long Beach. The students receive $3.10 per hour for 15 or fewer service hours per week. Twenty-five juniors and seniors from five high schools participate in the after school program. The six-week training period (30 hours) for each student includes examination of attitudes — their own and others—about aging. Further, they are taught how to handle problems frequently encountered in older persons, -emergency care practices, and basic nutrition. Following the training, students serve as in-home helpers for older persons one or more afternoons or evenings per week. They 'assist the older person to overcome isolation and cope with depression, anger, loss of mobility, and other problems through didactic dialogue, cleaning, cooking, shopping assistance, and numerous other services. The project director, B. J. Curry-Spitler, reports that the positive humanistic and attitudinal changes for both students and older persons appear to be of value equal to or greater than the service components of the project. Dr. Curry-Spitler hopes that the project, now in its second year, may set an example for other communities throughout the nation.

THE FUTURE

Research interest in the area of children's attitudes toward the elderly has continued to be minimal. No specific references in the literature or in our experience account for this paucity of research interest. Several studies of children's attitudes toward the elderly have been reported and discussed; however, little research has been done or reported on the largest and oldest program in the nation (Foster Grand-parents Program, ACTION) and its effects, if any, on the attitudes children have toward aging and the elderly. This program appears to be an ideal arena in which to study longitudinally the effects of increased contact on children's attitudes toward older persons. Such a study should be undertaken nationally by the ACTION program.

The one-year study of the attitudinal change effect of the Adopted Grand-parents Program was reported in the literature (Whitley, 1976). This study may be replicated and the original investigation developed into a longitudinal examination of the learning and attitudinal benefits that children experience through participation in the program, Similarly, the attitudinal benefits to the older persons participating in these programs should be investigated by Ms. Whitley and her associates. The specific outcomes are reported in *From Time to Time: A Record of Young Children's Relationships with the Aged* (Whitley, 1976).

The Foster Grandparents Program continues to receive federal funding; however, present national economic policy may result in a curtailment of monies for programs of this type. No federal monies have been applied for or used in the operation of Whitley's Adopted Grandparents Program. Perhaps federal grant funding should be considered as an option for counselors and teachers interested in providing similar educational programs for their students. Interested counselors or educators should write ACTION, Washington, D.C. for information grant funding. Model projects of this type have proven to be successful candidates in the discretionary grant arena, and funding through the Administration on Aging and from a variety of federal sources should be used to support such endeavors.

Service programs for the elderly have expanded rapidly since the Older Americans Act was enacted into law during 1965. Perhaps because of the rapid expansion of these programs, efforts have not been directed toward developing cooperative agreements with K-12 schools to enhance the exchange of resources. School counselors and teachers can become involved with existing senior citizens clubs, senior centers, and a variety of school-oriented youth programs, and through this involvement, arrange educational exchange for children and the elderly. Counselors interested in initiating such programs should contact the Area Agency on Aging in their locale for specific guidance on what exists and what is needed in their areas. Further, Ms. Whitley can be reached directly, as can local ACTION agencies. Information may also be obtained from state, regional, and national Aging offices.

Increased involvement of counselors and teachers may result in the development of a new and exciting resource for life span education and positive attitudinal change. Lifetime learning as concept may enhance growth potential for students of all ages. Ultimately, students of such programs could reshape the present ageist attitudes in the generations of the future. In the education of the intergenerational family, of teachers, and of children, the school counselor can become the catalyst through which ageism and negative stereotyping of older people can be ameliorated by establishing programs in the school similar to those described in this article. Further, counselor education training programs should include courses in gerontological counseling in their curricula to enhance counselors' abilities to develop programs that benefit the young and old alike. Through encouraging and facilitating contact and communication between young and old, the counselor can link persons who would otherwise never know, understand, or appreciate one another.

The literature supports the need for new and innovative programs in order to effect positive change in ageist attitudes among children, The potential for positive attitudinal outcomes developed in existing model programs may indicate that both children and the elderly can benefit from increased contact and interaction. School counselors can establish programs and encourage teachers and administrators to initiate and support them. *From Time to Time,* a description of a working model program by Esstoya Whitley, may he obtained by writing her at the address listed in the bibliography following this article (Whitley, 1976). Information on the Foster Grandparents Program may be obtained from local ACTION organizations. In both milieus, direct interaction and contact between children and older persons appeared to produce a positive change in attitude toward the elderly.

Through increased knowledge of and contact with older persons, children can view the elderly and themselves in more accepting, caring, and realistic perspectives while simultaneously learning, sharing, and growing.

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