

Interrelation of Perception of Old Age and Respect toward Old People among Young Adults

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The present study aimed to assess the relationship between the perception of old age and respect towards old people among young adults. A sample of 132 participants from two academic institutions of Karachi, Pakistan was assessed. The sample comprised of both males ($n = 69$) and females ($n = 63$). The age group of participants ranged from 19 to 30 years ($M = 21.44$, $SD = 1.86$) and they belonged to socioeconomic strata ranging from middle-middle class to upper-middle class. The participants were selected from nuclear and joint family systems. They were surveyed using Expectations Regarding Aging – 12 Survey form (Sarkisian, Steers, Hays, & Mangione, 2005) and the Refined Aging Semantic Differential form (Polizzi, 2003) to analyze perception of old age and respect towards old people, respectively. The results revealed a weak positive correlation ($p = .04$) between perception of old age and respect towards old people in young adults. The findings emphasize the significance of bolstering positive perception of aging among young adults.

Keywords: Perception, old age, respect, young adults, moral values

Perceptions are 'evaluations of one's own and others' internal states and beliefs as well as sensory stimuli. A person's perceptions are not necessarily identical to the stimulus object or event being perceived' (Churchill Livingstone's dictionary of sport and exercise science and medicine, 2008). Perception varies from individual to individual. Therefore, perception of old age among young adults could be both, positive and negative. The perceptions held by people about various things mostly stem from the influence of social environment. Youmans (1971) found a difference of perception about old age between young and old generations, and further concluded that the difference might be a result of culturally imposed stigmatization.

There have been several researches that assess the perception of old age. Gellis, Sherman, and Lawrance (2003) performed a study in which first-year university students of social work expressed a negative attitude towards old people in terms of different skills. Moreover, the Pew Research Center (Taylor, Morin, Parker, Cohn, & Wang, 2009) conducted a survey on adults, the findings of which demonstrated a significant gap between young and middle-aged adults' expectations for different markers of old age and the real experience of those markers by older adults.

Perception of old age has a probable connection with respect towards old people. Respect is 'a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities or achievements' (The New Oxford American dictionary, 2005). The possible connection could be explained by stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. A stereotype or negative belief about old age stemming from environment could lead to prejudice towards it. Subsequently, negative perception for old age could result in discrimination towards old people, in the form of disrespect for old people. Similarly, positive perception could lead to respect towards old people.

Few researches have been carried out to evaluate respect for old people and reasons behind low levels of respect for them. Palmore (2001) found that the type of ageism experienced the most by old people was disrespect towards them. Bowd (2003) found seven categories of stereotypes related to old people in narrative jokes among adults which represent disrespect. Boltz, Parke, Shuluk, Capezuti, and Galvin (2013) determined five main themes representing a deficit of old people – hospital setting fit. One of the themes was respect toward old people.

The interrelation of perception of old age and respect toward old people could also be described with the help of the term, self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, a person who has been living in a social environment where people regard old people positively tends to develop positive expectations regarding old age. One might start treating old people nicely and when one gets a good response because of their good behavior, the prophecy or expectations would come true. One may think that his assumption was correct and old people deserve to be respected. In this way, one's positive or negative expectations could lead to respectful or disrespectful behavior for old people.

Additionally, negative expectations could lead to bad health outcomes. Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl (2002) showed that American young adults having relatively negative perception about old age faced more mental problems in their old age and had on average 7.5 years shorter ages than those with positive perception.

In the light of the aforementioned researches, it would be interesting to know how young adults in Pakistan perceive old age and how much they respect old people as this area of research is relatively unexplored in Pakistan. Also, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Kinsella & Velkoff, 2001), in Pakistan, the population of people aged 65+ years and 80+ years was 4.1% and 0.5% respectively in 2000. Whereas in 2030, the figures are expected to rise up to 6.5% and 0.9% respectively. Therefore, there is a growing need to focus on psychosocial rights of older age people in Pakistan. Moreover, people from urban areas of Pakistan have started to move from a collectivistic society towards an individualistic society as they prefer to live in nuclear families, resulting in children losing contact with their grandparents, a major shift in the psychosocial exposure to older age adults. After taking into consideration the above mentioned literature, it has been hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between the perception of old age and respect towards old people among young adults.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of young adults from Karachi, Pakistan. Initially, the sample consisted of 167 participants. The forms of 35 participants were excluded because they contained incomplete information. Therefore, the final sample included 132 participants; with a total of 69 males and 63 females. 89.4% of the participants were single. The age group was in between 19 to 30 years ($M = 21.44$, $SD = 1.86$) and they belonged to both, nuclear (69.7%) and joint (30.3%) family systems.

Participants were enrolled in different programs; MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery), BDS (Bachelor of Dental Surgery), management sciences, engineering and computer science in two different universities of Karachi city. All of them had at least 12 years of education. Their socioeconomic status ranged from middle-middle class to upper-middle class.

Measures

Informed Consent Form

The participants' consent to participate in the study was taken by giving them informed consent form to sign. The purpose of the study was mentioned in the form along with their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality of their names and information was ensured.

Demographic Information Form

Some basic information about the participants was taken by providing the participants a demographic information form to fill name, age, gender, birth order, marital status, area of residence, family system, university name, educational program and semester were inquired. It was also asked if the subjects had any old age family members at home. The age and gender of old age family members were further asked.

Expectations Regarding Aging - 12 (ERA-12)

The Expectations Regarding Aging – 12 (ERA-12) Survey developed by Sarkisian, Steers, Hays, and Mangione (2005) was utilized. It is a 12-item survey which is used to measure expectations about aging on three scales, Physical Health, Mental Health and Cognitive

Function. Each scale has four items with a 4-point rating scale having definitely true, somewhat true, somewhat false and definitely false as responses. For the present study, the items were scored as, 1 for definitely false, 2 for somewhat false, 3 for somewhat true and 4 for definitely true. The total score ranged from 12 to 48. Lower scores represented higher expectations regarding aging and higher scores represented lower expectations regarding aging.

The ERA-12 was developed by using factor analysis. A Cronbach's coefficient alpha for internal consistency was found at 0.89. Intraclass correlation coefficient was found to be 0.94 (Sarkisian, Steers, Hays, & Mangione, 2005).

Refined Aging Semantic Differential (RASD)

The Refined Aging Semantic Differential (RASD) is a refined version of the Aging Semantic Differential (ASD) which was upgraded by Polizzi (2003). It measures a person's attitude towards old people. It includes 24 items comprising of opposite polar adjectives representing old people along with a 7-point Likert scale. It has one reversible item. The total score ranges from 24 to 168 after summing up. If the total score is less than 96, it indicates a positive attitude and if it is greater than 96, it indicates a negative attitude toward old people. For the present study, the age for old people was mentioned as 60 years and above in the RASD form. Moreover, the participants were asked to select the gender of old people which they wanted to keep in mind while filling the RASD form. The gender options included; male, female and both. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha for RASD was found to be 0.97 (Polizzi, 2003).

Procedure

After permission was granted by the authorities of two universities of Karachi city, students were surveyed individually using convenience sampling. They were given survey forms which comprised of informed consent form, demographic information form, Expectations Regarding Aging – 12 (ERA-12) form and Refined Aging Semantic Differential (RASD) form. They completed and returned the forms then and there.

After data collection, the forms were scored. All of the participants gave their consent to include their forms in the study. The forms which contained incomplete demographic information, incomplete questionnaires and forms of participants aged under 19 years or above 30 years were excluded during the scoring process. The scored data was then entered in the software of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-19) for correlational analysis. Further analyses was done by applying t – test and ANOVA.

Definitions of Key Terms

Perception of old age

An individual expecting a marked decline in physical health and mental functioning in their old age was considered as having a negative perception of old age. Similarly, an individual expecting a relatively less decline in physical health and mental functioning in old age was considered as having a positive perception.

Respect toward old people

An individual having low level of respect regarding people over 60 years of age with lower admiration and negative attitude whereas an individual having high level of respect regarding people over 60 years of age with higher admiration and positive attitude.

Results

The data of both the variables was found to be normally distributed. The variables were further analyzed by calculating correlation between them.

Table 1

Correlation between Perception of Old Age and Respect toward Old People (N=132)

Variable	Respect toward Old People
Perception of Old Age	.17*

* $p < .05$

Above results revealed a statistically significant association between perception of old age and respect toward old people among young adults ($N = 132$). The Pearson correlation coefficient of .17 was found to be statistically significant at $p < .05$. The results showed a weak positive correlation between the variables.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Participants and One Sample t-Test for Respect toward Old People

Variable	N	M	SD	SEM	t	df	p	MD	95% CI
Respect toward Old People	132	72.46	20.89	1.81	-12.94	131	.000**	-23.53	[-27.14, -19.94]

Note: The cut-off score for Refined Aging Semantic Differential form (Polizzi, 2003) is 96. Scores up to cut-off score represent high level and greater than cut-off score represent low level of respect.

MD = Mean Difference.

**p < .001

Table 2, variable of respect toward old people (M = 72.46, SD = 20.89) was investigated independently. One sample t – test exhibited a significant difference between high and low levels of respect among participants, $t(131) = -12.94$, $p < .001$.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Participants for Levels of Respect toward Old People

Level of Respect	<i>F</i>	%	CPC
Low	20	15.2	15.2
High	112	84.8	100.0
Total	132	100.0	

Note: CPC = Cumulative Percent.

Table 4
Distribution of Participants' Descriptive Statistics on the Basis of Gender, Academic Field, Family System and Selection of Gender for Old People

Variable	Category	Sub Category	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	
Perception of Old Age	Gender	Male	69	33.40	5.36	.64	
		Female	63	33.98	6.35	.80	
	Academic Field	Medicine	58	33.87	5.83	.76	
		Others	74	33.52	5.88	.68	
		Family System	Joint	40	33.53	5.57	.88
Respect toward Old People	Family System	Nuclear	92	33.75	5.98	.62	
		Gender	Male	69	72.79	19.41	2.33
	Gender	Female	63	72.09	22.56	2.84	
		Academic Field	Medicine	58	68.34	22.46	2.95
	Academic Field	Others	74	75.68	19.11	2.22	
		Family System	Joint	40	72.35	19.03	3.01
	Family System	Nuclear	92	72.51	21.75	2.26	
		Gender Options ^a	Male	36	77.00	19.36	-
			Female	30	67.23	20.99	-
			Both	66	72.36	21.38	-

Note: Medicine = MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery) and BDS (Bachelor of Dental Surgery); Others = Management Sciences, Engineering and Computer Science.

^aRespect toward old people among participants is shown on the basis of their selection of gender for people over 60 years of age on the Refined Aging Semantic Differential form (Polizzi, 2003) as, male, female or both.

Furthermore, both the variables were examined on the basis of participants' demographic data. Firstly, gender-based analysis was performed. The means along with standard deviations of perception and respect were 33.40(5.36) and 72.79(19.41) for males, and 33.98(6.35) and 72.09(22.56) for females, respectively (see Table 4).

Table 5*Independent Samples t – Test for Participants’ Gender, Academic Field and Family System*

Variable	Category	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	MD	95% CI
Perception of Old Age	Gender	-.56	130	.57	-.57	[-2.59, 1.44]
	Academic Field	-.34	130	.73	-.35	[-2.38, 1.68]
Respect toward Old People	Family System	-.20	130	.84	-.22	[-2.42, 1.97]
	Gender	.19	130	.84	.70	[-6.52, 7.93]
	Academic Field	2.02	130	.04*	7.34	[.17, 14.51]
	Family System	-.04	130	.96	-.16	[-8.02, 7.69]

* $p < .05$ Note: Gender = male and female; Academic Field = medicine and others; Family System = joint and nuclear. MD = Mean Difference.

There was a significant difference between medical students and students of other fields for the variable of respect. Medical students expressed more respect for old people as compared to students of other fields. Moreover, an insignificant difference was found for other variables.

Table 6*One-Way ANOVA for Participants’ Selection of Gender for Old People*

Variable	Groups	SS	df	MS	F	<i>p</i>
Respect toward Old People	Between	1562.17	2	781.08	1.81	.16
	Within	5646.63	129	431.36		
	Total	7208.81	131			

The results of One-way ANOVA showed no significant difference among all three gender options for respect toward old people, $F(2, 129) = 1.81, p = .16$ (Table 6). Thus, the perceived gender of old people had no effect on respect for old people among young adults.

Discussion

The results (Table 1) of the present study supported the hypothesis and showed a positive correlation between perception of old age and respect towards old people among young adults. The reasons for the presence of a relationship between the variables might include factors such as modeling. In Pakistani society, parents generally regard old people respectfully and also try to obey their own parents at home. Thus, children take along a positive and respectful attitude toward old people into their adulthood. Hutchinson, Maloney, Vogl, and Mattick (2008), and McBride, Collins, Bell, Quinn, and Worthy (2008) also demonstrated the phenomenon of modeling and showed that parents’ behavior influences children’s behavior as children try to model their parents.

Not only parents, society also plays an important role in establishing perceptions and attitudes. Acts of prosocial behavior for old people can be observed in Pakistan in general. For example, there is a common practice of leaving one’s seat and offering it to old people in public transport, and also, people mostly try to greet their old family members immediately as they meet them to show a courteous gesture.

Furthermore, belief systems of individuals influence their actions. Majority of the people in Pakistan strongly believe that they will be rewarded and given something good in their later life or life after death, if they perform good deeds in the present. Young adults want to be treated respectfully in their future old age by their children and other young adults, and this desire motivates them to perceive old people, present at home, positively; thus they make efforts to fulfill all of their needs and comfort. Mongrain, Chin, and Shapira (2011) also exhibited that compassionate actions for others can result in increased happiness and self-esteem.

All of the aforementioned factors might have contributed in creating positive perceptions of old age leading to respect for old people among young adults.

In the present study, when levels of respect were separately analyzed, the results (Table 2 and Table 3) revealed, contrary to previous researches, that 84.8 % of the participants had high level of respect towards old people and 15.2 % of them had low level of respect. One factor which was observed during data collection for the current study was social desirability response (SDR) bias. The SDR bias has been identified in prior researches as well, for instance in researches on sexual behavior (DiFranceisco, McAuliffe, & Sikkema, 1998) and partner violence (Babcock, Costa, Green, & Eckhardt, 2004).

While filling the questionnaire of Refined Aging Semantic Differential (Polizzi, 2003) in the present study, the participants appeared to conform to the acceptable norm of respecting elders. Many participants marked old people as extremely positive natured on almost all of the items by ticking 1 on a 7-point scale. They would also verbalize aloud that old people are generally good natured. The results for levels of respect might have been different if the items had been indirect and unapparent for the participants.

The participants were further categorized into two; males and females. When participants were computed for gender differences, it was revealed that the gender of participants did not influence the perception of old age held by them and the level of respect they had for old people (Table 4 and Table 5). Moreover, the standard deviation scores revealed that the level of respect varied considerably among participants whereas perception of old age varied a little for both genders. Also, the level of significance was comparatively higher for respect towards old people and lower for perception of old age. The results were partly similar to a prior study (Musaiger & D'Souza, 2009) in which insignificant differences were found between males and females for some categories of perception of older adults but not for the rest of the categories

In the current study, the variables were further analyzed by dividing the participants into medical students and students of other fields. Medical students exhibited more respect than other students (Table 4 and Table 5). The nature of study of medicine and other fields might have played a prominent role in creating a significant difference. Medical students have more interaction with humans and their field focuses on saving lives. This might have increased the level of respect for old people among medical students. There was no significant difference found for perception of old age between the two groups. The results were consistent with a research (Gonzales & Morrow-Howell, 2009) in which pretest results showed relatively positive attitude towards old people among medical students.

The participants were also examined on the basis of the family system they lived in (Table 4 and Table 5). For this purpose, participants were divided into nuclear and joint family systems. Strikingly, there was no significant difference found for perception of old age and respect towards old people among participants of both the family systems, which indicated that the family system did not influence perception of old age and level of respect. Levy (2003) argued that an individual derives expectations about aging from people in their environment. If someone's family and friends regard aging positively, they would also consider aging to be positive.

Therefore, a person with negative regard and expectations toward aging could also start regarding it positively due to the positive influence of their social environment. Thus, when adults from both family systems mingle, they share their thoughts and it creates homogeneity in their ideas and perception. Also, the dominant and prevailing thoughts and ideas of the society influence the perceptions and behaviors of individuals. This might be the reason which has brought perception and respect on the same level among individuals of both family systems.

As mentioned before, the participants were also asked to select the gender of people over 60 years in the RASD form (Polizzi, 2003). Although the difference was insignificant for all three gender options (male, female and both), the level of respect expressed for male gender was notably lower than female gender (Table 4 and Table 6). Formerly, studies have shown that older females were perceived more positively (Narayan, 2008) and older males were perceived as more suspicious, intolerant and conflictive (Arnold-Cathalifaud, Thumala, Urquiza, & Ojeda, 2008).

For the present study, the reasons for relatively low level of respect for older males might include post-retirement factors. In Pakistani society, most of the females who are currently 60 years and above had not worked in their young and middle adulthoods and had remained housewives. On the other hand, majority of the males who are at present 60 years and above had worked during their young and middle adulthoods. When these males retired, their work responsibilities got eliminated and they might have become little agitated because of being unoccupied for the whole day. Previous researches have suggested that psychological health of retirees declined as a long-term postretirement effect (Gall, Evans, & Howard, 1997) and more psychological symptoms were found among retirees than workers (Bossé, Aldwin, Levenson, & Ekerdt, 1987). Due to these factors, the participants might have expressed relatively lower level of respect for older males than females in the current study.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to assess the correlation between perception of old age and respect toward old people among young adults. The results showed a weak positive correlation between the variables. The study also demonstrates that positive perception could play an important role in instilling and altering ethical values and moral principle of respect among young adults.

Limitations and Recommendations

The present study had some limitations as well. Some measures are being recommended to future researchers for enhancing effectiveness of the study. The sample reduced to a number of 132 after following the exclusion criterion. The size of the sample was small. To enhance

generalization of the study, the sample size could be increased in number. Moreover, the participants were taken from only four academic fields. More fields could be added to the sample. In medical field, some other subfields for example, physiotherapy, pharmacy, nursing, etc. may also be added in addition to MBBS and BDS.

Furthermore, the Refined Aging Semantic Differential (Polizzi, 2003) was applied to assess respect among young adults. The items on the scale were little threatening for participants because the items were targeting one of the norms of society. In order to conform to the norm, some of the participants seemed to be falsifying. The selection of questionnaire to evaluate respect toward old people is suggested to be done more carefully for future research.

To get a better insight of the research topic, old people could also be included in the sample. They can be inquired about the level of respect they are getting from young adults.

Implications

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of adopting some measures to create awareness about old age among young adults. Adults would be able to live their future older lives with better adaptability, adjustment, physical health and mental functioning when positive attitude about old age is fostered among them. The measures could include awareness seminars for young adults and inclusion of old-age awareness topics in the curricula of schools, colleges and universities. This would help strengthen moral standards and positive perception about old age which in turn will increase respect for old people among young adults.

The current study supports the fight against ageism at workplaces, healthcare systems, etc. It is further recommended that the field of geropsychology should be introduced in Pakistan for the well-being of old people.

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