

# **IMPORTANCE OF INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL POPULATION AGEING – POLISH EXAMPLES**

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with the issue of building intergenerational relations in the context of progressive population ageing. The author raises three issues while discussing this topic. Firstly, she considers the importance of a positive image of the elderly and overcoming age-related stereotypes. Secondly, she refers to some contemporary threats that endanger intergenerational relations or severely hamper their development. Finally, the author identifies necessary actions to be taken in various areas of social life that could facilitate building and maintaining positive relations between generations.

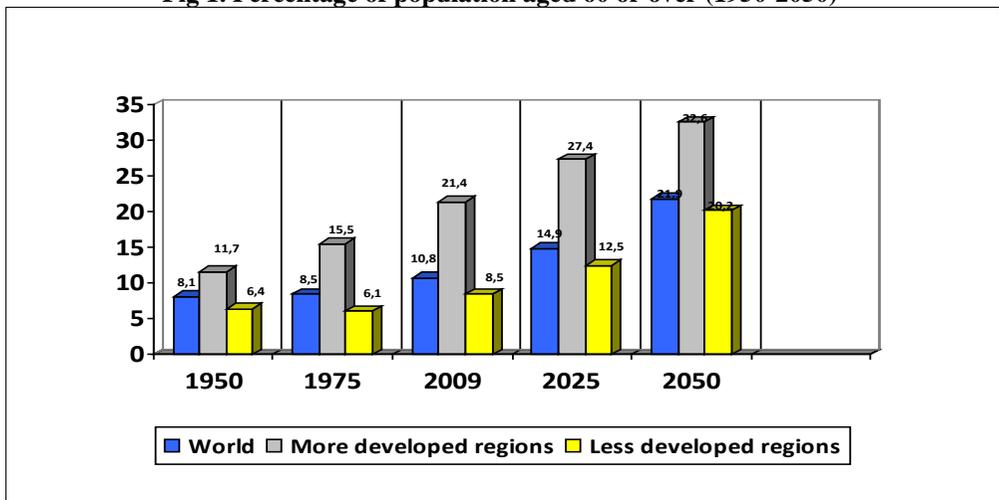
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**Keywords:** Intergenerational relations, interactions, grandparents-grandchildren relations, intergenerational bonds

## **Introduction**

Intergenerational relations can be considered both in the demographic context, in the aspect of intergenerational bonds in social and family relations, as well as in repetition of behavioral patterns, inheritance of lifestyle and social status.

In this article, I am going to focus on the importance of building intergenerational relations in the context of population ageing, pointing to opportunities, hazards and related challenges, also to contemporary education. Population ageing is a global issue, according to demographic data, people aged 65 or over make up 16% of EU's population and it is estimated that by 2050, this ratio will increase to 28% on the European continent and exceed 20% in the global scale. (Fig.1.)

**Fig 1. Percentage of population aged 60 or over (1950-2050)**

Source:<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/ageing/ageing2009chart.pdf#page=2&zoom=80,480,1936> [27.07. 2013]

The progressing population ageing process entails a number of consequences and will require implementation of various solutions in many areas. An example of such actions is the United Nation International Plan of Action adopted in Madrid, committing its members to undertake actions in three priority areas: older persons and development, advancing health and well-being into old age, ensuring enabling and supportive environment. The European Union also designated the year 2012 to be the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. This initiative was aimed at creating better employment opportunities and work conditions for the increasing number of older people in Europe, promoting active living for older people in social life and encourage healthy ageing and independent life (European Commission 2012). As a result of this initiative, many European countries launched a number of events, projects and enterprises both at local and international levels.

### **Building a positive image of the old age**

The social image of the elderly, built on the basis of one's own observations, publications in media and stereotypes, plays an important role in building positive relations.

The first issue I am going to raise is the way the society perceives the elderly. According to the studies of 2006 (Rogala 2007) on a group of 863 Poles, mostly people aged 20-40, almost 60% of the respondents claimed that perception of the elderly is based on their physical appearance. Almost half of the respondents claimed that seniors usually think that they are wiser than other people or even infallible. Such way of perception can cause

problems in relations, discourage dialogue or even lead to avoiding contacts with the elderly.

The omnipresent obsession with youth and beauty promoted in mass media affects social attitude towards the old age and the importance of this period of life in general – including the attitude of the elderly towards their own old age, forcing them to conceal their physical manifestations of old age and to try to adapt to the existing standards of physical appearance (Biggs 1997). In the contemporary culture, seniors who do not conform to such image can experience a specific feeling of desolation and exclusion. Social image of seniors is also affected to a large extent by the way the younger generations imagine their own old age, the way they think about this period of their lives – both in the aspect of opportunities such stage of life brings about, as well as fears and uncertainty that may emerge. Adult Poles, while thinking of their old age, fear disease and disability in the first place, then becoming a burden to others, and eventually existential difficulties, loneliness and feeling of being unnecessary. Similar opinions have been expressed in representative studies carried out over the last 12 years. (CBOS<sup>6</sup>, 2012). In the last years, however, old age can also be perceived as the time of additional opportunities, time that can be spent for making one's plans come true and doing what was once impossible because of one's job and duties. Such perception can be the antidote to the fear of loneliness. Educational, social or any other activities of the elderly give them the feeling of being useful, protect them from alienation and provide them with an opportunity to establish interpersonal relations. It also contributes to strengthening of a positive image of a senior as someone who is independent and open-minded, in accordance with the saying „add life to your days, not days to your life”.

However, while creating the image of seniors, one cannot ignore some difficult aspects of the old age that are an integral part of this stage of life. Of course one can prevent it, eliminate the risks, there are, however, some age-related ailments or diseases that are unavoidable in the old age and should be treated as something natural in this period of life, something that requires help and often sacrifice of the closest relatives. In early old age, grandparents help in looking after and raising their grandchildren, they also often help in household chores, however, they need care as well as time passes by – we can say this is the period of „paying off the debt” the adult children and grandchildren owe the older generation.

According to the studies by CBOS (2009), most of the respondents (87%) believe that the elderly are necessary in the society, for example because they have time for their grandchildren when the parents are working

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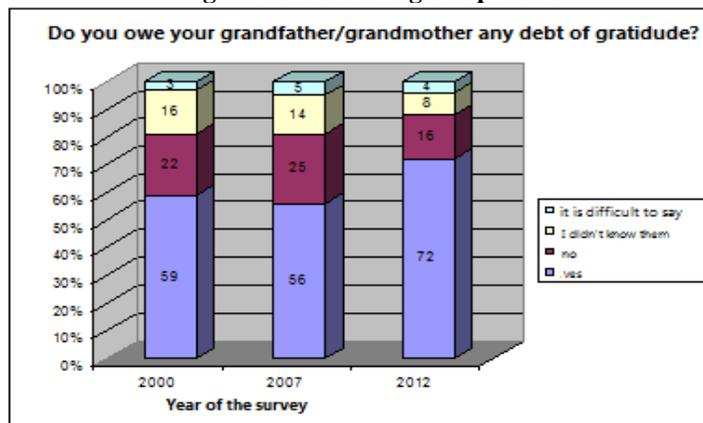
<sup>6</sup> Public Opinion Research Centre

(97%), have knowledge and wisdom (95%), have time for social activity (88%) and can support their grandchildren financially (90%). However, as far as the issue of respect for the elderly is concerned, only 13% of the respondents in the same study believe that the elderly are well respected in Poland, half of the respondents say that they are rather respected and 28% see some disrespect for the elderly. This situation looks better when it comes to respect for seniors in their close environment – most of the respondents (81%) claim that they are friendly to the elderly, 16% are indifferent and only 2% say about reluctance. According to the respondents, hostility towards the elderly can be most frequently seen in shops, offices and healthcare centers and the worst situations can be seen on the streets, in means public communication and – what is very alarming – they are often provoked by young people. Settings that are most friendly to the elderly are: family (82%), neighbors (71%) and parish community (69%). Other studies (Zawada 2010) carried out among students of pedagogy show that what they value most in the elderly are wisdom, moral values and selflessness, claiming at the same time that younger generations often lack such qualities. Young people in their 20s want to learn the following from seniors:

- how to behave in difficult situations in life;
- wisdom that cannot be learned from any book;
- selfless work and help;
- values such as honesty and sense of justice.

In the context of family roles played by the elderly – according to CBOS' data (CBOS 2012 Report, *Role of grandparents in our life*) – most of adult Poles (86%) define their relations with grandparents during childhood as close, including 61% speaking of very close bonds. The feeling of being thankful for grandparents (Fig.2) has also been increasing over the last years – from slightly over 50% in 2002 and 2007 to 72% in 2012.

**Fig.2. Gratitude for grandparents**



Source: own diagram on the basis of CBOS' report, *Role of grandparents in our life*, [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K\\_008\\_12.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2012/K_008_12.PDF), [6.09.2012]

The feeling of gratitude for grandparents results mainly from the role they played in upbringing and care of their grandchildren (65%) and from treating their grandchildren with love (64%). Slightly over than a half of the respondents said that the grandparents taught them their family's history, instilled moral values and faith and almost half of the respondents are grateful that their grandparents developed in them such personality traits as: sense of duty, diligence, self-discipline or strong will, but also knowledge of history and patriotism. A relatively small number of respondents (10%) mentioned material values. Of key importance is active participation of the grandparents in raising and caring for their grandchildren. Majority of the respondents (83%) who experienced such care described their relations with grandparents as very close. According to H. Swida – Ziemia (2000, p.158-159), grandparents „show the world to their grandchildren, they play the role of „wise men” and universal role models, being their „foundations”, unlike parents, who are forced to „keep up with the present” together with their children”. Experience resulting from grandparents' involvement in upbringing of their grandchildren creates a special bond beneficial to both parties. It is valuable for both grandchildren as they keep all the moral and educational values received from their grandparents in their minds, which could be beneficial in the future, as well as for older generation, who can also gain energy, liveliness and experience abundance of feelings and emotions. Individual positive experience of younger generations in relations with older people plays an important role in building a positive image of the elderly in the closest environment of grandparents. Local family setting is a broader community for seniors and with time – after retirement and gradual loss of professional contacts – often becomes their only community.

### **Hazards in intergenerational relations**

One of the major hazards in intergenerational relations is generational transmission of violence in family upbringing. Repeating violent behavior patterns of one's own family concerns not only parent-child relations, but also adult child-old parent relations. Children raised in domestic violence often do the same to their old and disabled, sometimes burdensome parents what the parents did to them. Victims of domestic violence during childhood become perpetrators of violence in their adult life to become victims again in later life. The issue of elder violence is of global nature and is not marginal and the importance of this problem in ageing society is stressed by world's leading organizations (World Health Organization 2002, *World report on violence and health*; United Nations 2002, *United Nation International Plan of Action on Ageing*; European Commission 2007, *Health and long-term care in the European Union*)

Studies on this problem are still scarce in Poland and as far as domestic violence is concerned, the Police does not even have any statistics concerning older victims. According to the data obtained from *Blue Card*<sup>7</sup> documents at the District Police Headquarters in Krakow, the elderly were victims of 15% of cases of domestic violence and in 56% of such cases, their adult children were the perpetrators. Considering the fact that it is only the lower limit of the scale of this problem, the popular, even stereotypical opinion on it being marginal and concerning dysfunctional families only, should change as according to the above data, only 18% of perpetrators of domestic violence against the elderly were under the influence of alcohol (Mackowicz 2012).

Studies on the issue of elder violence were conducted in Poland by Halicka (2009) on a group of 560 people, among students, police officers, social workers and nurses. As many as 38% of the respondents have come across various elder abuse and over 40% of them have encountered such problem during their professional work.

Another concern today is the weakening of interpersonal bonds in family, friend and local communities replaced by virtual contacts that are becoming the main tool for building social interactions, especially among young people.

Highly competitive market, the necessity to meet expectations on many levels, as well as the pace of changes, forcing young people to concentrate mainly on professional life make their lives limited to individual space only, meeting with other generations only occasionally. Moreover, economic migrations of parents, changing family model, traditional family roles and system of values contribute to weakening or even disappearance of intergenerational bonds.

### **Challenges of the present...**

According to Szukalski (2010), the importance of intergenerational relations has been increasing. Today we face very rapid demographic, social, cultural and technological changes. M. Mead (2000) in his analysis of intergenerational relations between children, parents and grandparents distinguishes between three types of cultures depending on the direction of transfer of values, tradition and knowledge. Those are:

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<sup>7</sup> The *Blue Card* procedure has been followed by the Police in Poland since 1998 in the case of family violence interventions. Since 2004, the BC procedure has also been followed by social workers and since 2010 – by employees of public education, healthcare and local commissions for solving alcohol problems. The procedure ensures support from institutions and if the victim refuses help – monitoring of the family situation by police community support officers. Starting the BC procedure does not require consent of the victim.

- 1) postfigurative culture;
- 2) cofigurative culture;
- 3) prefigurative culture

In a postfigurative culture, the elderly play the most important role in transmission of norms, they try to make younger generations share their own world view and the cultural transmission is unquestionable. Cofigurative culture, in which the middle generation prevails, does not take into consideration the opinions of the elderly, what is most important are peers and focusing on the present. The third type of culture – prefigurative culture, is characterized by rapid changes we face today. According to Mead, only the young generation is able to keep up with such changes and the older generations have to learn from their own children and grandchildren. Young people try to fit in the current lifestyle, popular models and often reject the values of the older generation as useless, impractical and old-fashioned. What can be seen here is the generational gap known from the beginning of time, although changes have never been so rapid as today. However, a room for new roles can be created in this model of intergenerational interaction – a room, where generations of children, parents and grandparents are both conveyors and recipients of values, knowledge and tradition. Intergenerational dialogue becomes a necessity in modern times and is a huge challenge to all kinds of social institutions, especially those responsible for education. Schools at all levels of education can initiate a number of activities in their local environment and shape the right attitudes towards the elderly in general, not only towards one's grandparents, as in the latter case, it often becomes a natural consequence of bonds and being together.

### **Recommendations**

According to the *United Nation International Plan of Action on Ageing(UN 2002)*, the following activities will help fill the generation gap:

- to encourage mutual relations, pointing to the need of strengthening solidarity between generations and implementing intergenerational partnerships, taking into consideration the needs of both older and younger generations;
- to promote strengthening of intergenerational bonds in family settings, in which the elderly can significantly contribute to upbringing of their grandchildren;
- to undertake initiatives aimed at promotion of cooperation between generations, focusing on the elderly being social resources;
- increase the opportunities for maintaining and improving intergenerational relations in local communities, e.g. by facilitating meetings of all age groups and avoiding generational segregation;

- to raise awareness among the professionals and improve general public education using multimedia and other campaigns aimed at raising public awareness of elder abuse;

- to promote the understanding of the ageing process and positive image of the elderly through general public education;

- to prevent social exclusion of the elderly by promoting civil and cultural activity, providing aid to communities and support groups, as well as facilitating active participation of the elderly in volunteering activities;

The array of activities related to demographic processes requires a strategic approach in various aspects of social life in both local and global dimension. Such processes are also a unique opportunity to strengthen intergenerational bonds and sense of community, as well as the chance to bring together as many as four generations which has never happened before in human history.

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