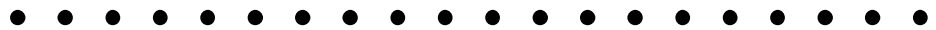




LAUREA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Students' and Elderly People's Perceptions of Age



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Students' and Elderly People's Perceptions of Age

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Finnish population is ageing fast. The same development can be seen in other European countries. Age sets certain constraints and expectations of what is seen as appropriate. The ability to understand the prevailing culture of how to perceive old age is elemental in order to analyze the factors which could possibly hinder social work with the elderly and young people on an individual or organizational level.

On the top of the theoretical knowledge of ageing in the social field there is a need for a better understanding of how the elderly persons and young people alike perceive old age. The aim of this study was to give an arena for old and young people to express their own thoughts on the subject that is currently discussed in media.

A rich combination of the different theoretical aspects is reflected in the light of the empirical data. The data was collected among clients in an Elderly care unit and the degree students at The University of Applied Sciences (Laurea Otaniemi) during the months of September and October 2010. A total of four elderly willingly participated in the story telling based interview and a total of five students took part in the study by writing their personal narratives on the topic. Qualitative content analysis was used as a research method in the data analysis.

Four main categories and fourteen sub-categories were formed as a result of the data analysis. The main categories consist of physiological and psychological condition, personal state of mind, culturally bounded content and societal approach. The findings uncovered some differences in the concepts of age between different age groups. However, what was more significant was the general likeness in the stories of the informants. The findings of the study can be used by a number of different organisations to effectively see the needs of the elderly persons. The study reveals that both the young and the old are affected strongly by age discrimination in our society.

Key words: age, aging experience, ageism, old age

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1 Introduction

"If you want to succeed, ask three old people for advice."

(Chinese saying)

This thesis is a part of the R&D Safe Home research project which is organized by Laurea University of Applied Sciences in co-operation with Espoo city's providers for elderly care. My hope is to provide a useful tool for experts in the field of elderly care and to allow clients of elderly care the opportunity to express their views. This is in line with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health publications that clients of elderly care must be given the opportunity to have an influence the city's old age and service policy. (Ministry of Social affairs and Health 2008, 14).

The study has risen from my experience of working with the elderly in Espoo. Also the fact that over the next few decades the Finnish population is rapidly aging has brought many concerns to social work. Service providers will need to find new ways and methods for addressing the needs of the elderly that demonstrate dignity and respect for the individual needs of every client (Ministry of Social affairs and Health 2008, 1).

A greater understanding of the elderly is one of the most important issues of our future. In Finland like in other European countries the life expectancy is increasing all the time: by the year 2050 within Europe there will be more than 80 million elderly people (Merck 2006). The elderly should be encouraged to be more actively involved with the decision making processes in society. Old age affects every one of us. It is not only necessary to see the perspectives of older people but also of the younger. I hope that the information I have got from my informants could be somehow useful in the field of gerontology as my main concern is to find ways to enhance the quality and satisfaction of elderly people's lives.

Improving the quality of life of Europe's increasing elderly population is one of the most pressing challenges facing our society today. Nearly 14% of the EU-population is over the age of 65 and this figure is expected to double by 2050. By then we will have many older Europeans who should continue to play an active role in our society, despite the limitations of their age. Research shows that not all people in this target group are taken into account based on their personal opinions. More and more providers of health care need to consider what are the user needs and wants, which will give the elderly a more dignified life. (Reding 2007, 1)

I became concerned with the topic as I have always thought how little research has been conducted among clients themselves. I got interested in the topic as there has not been much research done on how the elderly perceive old age. Many studies have just focused on what old age is; I want to focus on what are old and young people's perceptions and how does that effect the client. By studying both concepts one can see the similarities and comparisons of concepts of old age.

My aim in this work is to give an opportunity to people interviewed and let them to express themselves instead of just taking a perspective from the workers of that sector. Is there something we can learn from them? Should we listen to their wisdom more carefully and appreciate their work for this society? According to the latest Local Government Act (Kuntalaki 365/1995), the elderly should have the opportunities to influence on municipal decisions. This is also a deeper philosophical question to how we perceive life; what is a human being? Are we mere objects of global economy or do we all have a unique value as individuals? There are some other topics related to my study, but not about how the young and elderly perceive age. Hence, I see a need to gain more information in this field of research. This could be a tool for professionals to help them to reflect conceptions of old age and can be used in varied socio-cultural connections.

2 Theories of Old Age

2.1 Age and Ageism

In every society age is graded and it gives certain status and role to its citizens and also constraints of what is expected of him or her. Human life is put into categories: toddler, child, adult or old person. Age is a social construction together with a social meaning or constraint. In some countries for instance age defines when we should marry, start work or go to school and from my own experience, many primitive cultures have different perspectives of "proper" age what we have in the West. According to medical research, after the age of 30 our body already starts to decline in all organ systems (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 6)

Attitudes toward aging are often tied to history and the current culture we live in, rapid change in our global world changes all the time of how people perceive old age in the post-modern era. Ageist attitudes can be positive or negative, but the past 20 years has seen a change from the old being pitied to one of being also of value due to the ideal of lifelong learning being present. (Ebersole, Hess & Luggen 2004, 14).

Aging is a term that was a status in determining who is the strongest or wisest in the community. It is a term that is used in every aspect of the life span - whether in a positive or negative meaning. In Finland like in other modern countries the word aged or elderly is used as a form of social, legal and administrative definition. (Johnson 1998, 3) Troyansky states that in the 18th century the word old age was important as it determined what behaviour was deemed appropriate or inappropriate; the age was seen as a greater spiritual importance. Many sociologists think that in the post-modern era the term aged or elderly is deemed to have a narrow meaning to fit the needs of the capitalist market systems. Moreover Finland's health policy has its own strengths and weakness when looked from an international perspective. Therefore I see much interest in my research to hear of more the clients of old age and what it means to them. (Teperiet, Porter, Vuorenkoski & Baron 2009.)

In the modern world to define age is not a simple task as age cannot be given any mathematical formula - even if the government stipulates an old age requirement the concept for younger and older groups of the population is constantly shifting. However, many people who study gerontology tend to use a figure that is from the age of 60 or 65 and up to determine old age (Timonen 2008, 7) or can this be just a modern western way of looking at the picture. Even globally it seems to be a good age where many psychological and physical changes occur but in many undeveloped countries this could be reversed. It is essential to stay away from vague assumptions of what is old age (Stuart-Hamilton 2006, 25)

One must be careful when defining age as it varies a lot depending on the culture or the historic time period one was born. For instance, a primitive society in the Pacific Ocean has different expectations of what is old age from the Finnish view. In today's society people have different expectations of what is old age from what people in the past used to think. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 6) This issue has also been discussed by as follows: "The definition of old is therefore flexible and a construction of society". He later goes on to describe that today the definition of old age can also depend on other factors such as one's social status or income which can give people different experiences of aging. A highly educated person might have different perceptions from that compared to a construction worker for example. (Phillips & Marshall 2006, 9-12)

The word ageing has been often used to describe that the human body is more likely or prone to diseases or illness, but little is pointed out to me in my literature review that aging has much individual variation either from a cultural or societal point of view or as Kirkwood (Arkling 2006, 10) states is often up to our genetic making or luck alone. What we actually mean by ageing itself has multiple meanings.

Ageism

Knowledge of old age and the perceptions from both the elderly and the young could possibly break down many preconceived ideas about the elderly in Finland. Age identification is a topic that needs more research. This study aims to take away some of those myths of ageism amongst us.

The word ageism means a term that is used to classify one age group that is inferior to the other. Ageism is a way of looking at old people unfortunately with the stereotypes that are attached to them. The very word ageism brings notations from the younger to the older of resentment of the financial burden that will be placed upon us shortly. Or maybe it is a way to put people in their slot in the fight for the younger to get more challenging positions in their careers. However, ageism is a word that gives a bias meaning or leads easily into discrimination toward the elderly. Discrimination of age can give a meaning of both negative and positive attributes. Moreover, the negative aspects of ageism is the one that is most encountered. (Cotter 2008, 9) Ageism can also be seen when the younger generation believe they are entitled to more resources than the older population. (Scrutton 1999, 9 - 11)

Ageism is a social attitude. It is a way of looking at older people that stereotypes them. It is also a part of attitudes where people believe that older adults can be treated in demeaning ways. Many people note that as they grow older and as they reach certain mile stones, age 65 being one of them, others begin to treat them differently which means being treated as less valued or less capable. Ageism is also reflected when younger persons implicitly or explicitly act as if they are more entitled to family or social resources than older adults are. Older people are often stereotyped as negatively, sick, frail and disabled, or positively stereotyped as wise or caring. But both types of stereotypes are damaging, since the wide range of attitudes prevent people from accurately assessing and responding to social problems and conditions of older adults. Ageism can be reflected in discriminatory practices in housing, employment and services of all kinds. (Cotter 2008, 19)

Ageism and the aged are all the time in the current media. There are of course, remarkable cultural differences how age is perceived. Media is also to blame for many of the negative stereotypes that exist of the elderly. A trendy concept of life long learning, it seems to me, will have a great effect into our economy through education and wants to give a message that nothing is enough. Much needs to be done if we are to stop the perceptions that currently exist about the elderly. The biggest tool we have in rehabilitation is that of our mind and conceptions of ourselves. Therefore stereotypes that say the elderly are a drain on society and prone to all kinds of sickness can be a powerful toll in leading to elderly to believe they are in fact disabled members of society (Nelson 2004, 292)

As one can see there are many stereotypes and assumptions of the old or elderly should not be taken literally. One should look more into the positive aspects of ageism instead of its negative feelings. Age should be seen as nothing to fear but could be seen as a stage where other opportunities to participate in society might be able to exist. (Chittister 2008, 25) Acknowledgement of age-related issues must begin by a greater understanding and knowledge of our own roles in society and the views of others of what aging is, before we make judgments that keep negative perceptions of old age alive.

Even if old age is a natural phenomenon that will affect us all one day it has strongly negative echo. It comes clear that ageism is socially constructed concept and more work should be done in educating the health care workers to help the elderly to come to terms with this time of the life span. (Scrutton 1999, 32) Older people are often taught by society in general to be helpless and quite often older people themselves start to believe that. People should start to have some control over their lives. More work needs to be done in guiding our golden generation to give elderly a better understanding what is old age and how one can enjoy life to its fullest despite the aging process. Good and efficient counselling for the elderly should take place before retirement to give the population time and tools to come to grips with this often misunderstood phase of life. (Scrutton 1999, 33)

In order for us who are involved in social work it is our duty to fight against ageism and ensure that the rights of the elderly are met. We need to re-examine our system of how society portrays aging. This is of great importance to take away certain myths that are stigmatised of old age. Social workers and nurses play a pivotal role in protecting and building up clients' self-confidence. This includes many facets of old age from employment up to medical care. If old people would have more tools to join together their voice could be more influential in having an impact on how old age should be taken care of. (Wallace 2007, 10)

2.2 Theories of Age

No theory has been able to explain the reasons for aging. However, every theory is a key to a better understanding of the aging process (Ebersole, Hess & Luggen 2004, 30). Here I have constructed a framework that consists of five theoretical perspectives aiming to give light to the issue.

2.2.1 "Usual Aging"

Older people have been divided into two groups, the diseased and the "normal". Those who are normal have not yet got all the illness that come along with old age but many elderly people are left wondering what implies "normal". Both young and old can be at risk of sugar

diabetics' alleviation of blood pressure or being over or underweight. The word 'normal' could pose a risk to the elderly: from having such a term, when elderly become aware of the factors that could affect their aging process such as exercise, diet and lifestyle the rate of inevitable decline of the human body could be one of success in our later phase of life. It's a fundamental truth that as we grow older we become more prone to diseases today more than ever. In the polluted environment there is greater chance of dementia, cancer and other diseases that affect the elderly. Those who are in the normal group have all been affected by physiological and mental changes of old age. Luckily, elderly people in these days are becoming aware that they are responsible for their own wellbeing during old age (Kahn & Rowe 1998, 53).

The process of aging can not be stopped. It is an irreversible process that affects us all. However, as mentioned by Wallace (2007, 75) there is a great difference of how these age-related changes will happen. We can not assume that every individual will undergo certain changes at a specified time. Another outstanding point here is that it can't be assumed that we all will suffer from some typical diseases as every individual is affected by factors which can be to some degree preventable or reversible. It is critically important that all carers will be informed about the certain characteristics of what aging may bring but somehow avoid stereotyping of prescribing medical care that might not be appropriate for that particular person. This could lead the person being treated to feel uncomfortable or one could be prescribing medical checks that are expensive and unnecessary (Wallace 2007, 75).

2.2.2 Biological theory

The way a person ages is predetermined even before birth, and we can do little to stop the aging process. We can only do things that might improve our health in the future. Many theories state clearly that the aging process is determined by our genes but that is not the whole picture. One just needs to look at Finland and ask why the Swedish speaking Finns live longer than average Finns. (Wallace 2007, 23) There are many perspectives in biological theory itself and here, I have chosen some of the perspectives that shed light into the question of biological aging process.

Much information is available of anti-aging drinks and diets but the secret of age is not solved yet. The word aging or aged is a multifaceted way for describing the rapid decline of physiological functions. Modern science have attempted to come up with many reasons and assumptions of what is old age and the reason for it all theories including that of aging must be backed up on scientific analysis (Wallace 2007, 23).

The senescence theory is a term used when age-associated health problems are born. Depending on our predestined genetic makeup for some people aging could be in lost vision or arthritic pain however more research needs to be done in this area. (Wallace 2007, 23) Nothing can prevent us from aging which is normal for all of the world's living organisms (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 69). Many questions remain in gluing together the puzzle of why we age. New information is being produced all the time of unlocking the mysteries of the human cell (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 30).

The wear and tear theory is like a car: over time the body degrades and needs repairing. Every species on earth has a clock that gives its maximum life span: a dog has around 20 years, a fly just a few days. Other factors such as environmental influences also must be taken into account. Some cells cannot be repaired due to the fact of old age it self. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 69)

Autoimmune theory explains when one's own body rejects tissues that are made by it and has a hard time to attack certain viruses and illnesses. The weakening of the immune system makes the body more prone to many of the disease of old age e.g. cancer or arthritis. However, this theory does not describe why this happens but explains only the effect that age has on the system nor is it clear why the thymus gland shrinks with age and its effect on ones individual health. (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 36)

Free radical theory states that many harmful chemicals are stored in the body which adds to the speeding up of the aging process. It is also mentioned that the consumption of large dose of antioxidants such as vitamin e and c can slow down the aging process. If damage to these cells done by free radicals is part of normal aging and if measurements are taken to slow down this mutations or counter the effects then the damages of strokes, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease could be greatly reduced. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 71)

The cellular aging theory tells us that every cell is determined to live for a set amount of years and the older we get the fewer cells are produced. They follow our biological clock and after a certain age stop producing completely. The important role of cell production in aging is widely studied and with greater insights in to the cells that are reproduced in a lab environment will give mankind a greater knowledge in slowing down the process of aging. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 71)

2.2.3 Psychological Theories

It is of most importance here to explain psychological theories of ageing. They aim to explain why people behave differently and give the reasons for it. Unfortunately in today's society there is not enough focus on developmental psychological for the elderly. This means leaving a large piece of the pie out for the elderly that could possibly empower them with psychological growth. It is said that the process of aging is one of psychological, physical and social. Ageism and many other theorists point to age as a decline to all areas of life but little is mentioned that it could be a time of growth as well. (Vincent 1995, 155)

Many theories of age are based on a very Western cultural point of view. For instance, Erikson's and Freud's points of view are sometimes biased as their views could be seen to affect only the Western cultural patterns into today's society. (Vincent 1995, 157) Very little is known about the psychological need of the elderly because in general little research has been done on the view of the elderly themselves. I believe that those who study gerontology do not fully know yet the real full potential of the elderly. Therefore more research needs to be done in this area. Understanding physiological aspects of ageing makes you careful not to think that a certain illness automatically happens at a certain age as we are all individuals and have different genetic makeup. (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 39)

Morality

Aspect of morality in psychological health means that one's cultural values or norms of society have been moved and causes psychological stress. All turning points of life create some moral dilemmas: starting school, changing jobs or moving home. Moral reasoning in later life gets a new or different function according to the changes that take place and the individuals place in society. Much talk has been done on that moral aging is based on the obligations of the old towards our upcoming generation. Moreover morality in today's society is constantly changing (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 40)

Intellect and challenges

Intelligence has been a difficult concept to define as every individual is so different and has her own strengths and weaknesses. Big part of our intelligences is pre-destined by certain genetic or biological factors but can also be greatly influenced by environmental factors such as education or an absence of intellectual stimuli. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 165)

In Eastern tradition people tend to believe that wisdom and intellect increases in old age. In contrary, in the West we tend to perceive old age as a decline to our working and mental

abilities. Many old people who have experienced much in life do agree that the new situation in life does dramatic changes. This often attributes to boredom and a lack for the lustre of life itself. The biggest challenge for the elderly is to manage to keep the independence and self control. It is a large step for an elderly person to gain successful aging. (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 40)

Self view and Self-esteem

Realistic self view and self esteem are elemental factors in successful ageing. If an elderly person has a good view of himself and of the world around him he is likely to handle better certain changes that might start to affect him. (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 40) The elderly constantly need to revise their self image and self esteem as their image is changing all the time due to a new social role being present. There are two ways to adapt to the process: accommodation or assimilation.

Accommodation requires personal skills and work to change the self. For instance, we are talking about accommodation when can a member of the royal family give up his duties or public role, when that role has been part of his life for the last 30 or 50 years. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 165)

Assimilation as adaptation to a new situation and roles requires much from an elderly person and not all are capable of doing so. For example, one might accept playing bingo on Friday night as an acceptable retirement hobby but for other it's not an easy transition. For those who are able to accept assimilation of new roles will have a more successful transition into successful old age. However, it is also mentioned that ones identity or self-concept is maintained even till death and unaffected by sickness. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 202-203)

Self esteem of the elderly today in our society is on the decline. Moreover, a lot is to do with the attitude level: our society values youth at the expense of age. For some who have retired with a large nest egg to reach certain mile stone could be seen as a time of great self esteem but for many it causes identity shattering. Many studies point out that self esteem starts to decrease after the age of 50 when the elderly start to compare themselves with the energy and drive of the youth at their work place. However, it is good to point out that people from the higher economical classes of society suffer less from self esteem issues than those with lower socioeconomic status. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 202-204)

Intimacy

Intimacy is a word used to describe closeness but does also not mean physical contact or sexual relationships. To an old person it can mean love, friendship or just sharing of every day's woes. Without intimacy the elderly often feel alone or withdrawn from society. Intimacy does not have to be sexual, it can include going for walks together, sharing news, touching or giving each other a massage. In old age intimacy can become stronger in terms of respect, commitment and emotional support. However, it is important to note here that if a relationship is abusive by nature many older people do not seek or can be bothered to invest their time in developing a more intimate relationship with their spouse. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 202-204)

Wolanin (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 40) goes on to say that "I did not believe that people in their eighties could go on to develop such new and more intimate relationships as I have experienced in the last few years." This information reveals that certain myths about old age and their ability to make and keep relationships is changing. Because of the isolation that the elderly feel they would be in more need of touch than is thought in our society. I have noticed myself even if time would not permit due to understaffing or lack of time I can make a big difference to the life of the elderly if I simply tap them on the shoulder and say good morning. It would be important for me to note here as a student of social services working in a multicultural atmosphere that in some cultures this "Finnish way" could be very offending behaviour so one needs to take this into account. Moreover, current research states that those elderly who visit other elderly and engage in touch e.g. holding hands or giving a hug are better able to cope with the adaptation of aging. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 202-204)

Religion

Old age has been in most of the cultures associated with religion. There is also a strong assumption that people become more religious as they age. However, this is not necessarily the case in real life. (Harris 2007, 204) Because it is very difficult to measure religion and religiousness, it is not easy to judge how religious the elderly are. However, the studies have shown that Belief in God is stronger among the elderly than in other age groups (Harris 2007, 205). The meaning of religion especially on deeply personal level and the social level are vitally important as the elderly persons seek for meaning for afterlife and to reduce isolation. (Harris 2007, 206-208)

2.2.4 Psychosocial theories of aging

Disengagement

This theory claims that "aging is an inevitable, mutual withdrawal or disengagement; resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social system he belongs to" (Cumming & Henry 1961, 2). This is a part of aging where a person distances himself from the mainstream society. He wants to let go of roles he once had to a younger generation; in many countries society even demands that disengagement of the elderly will take place.

Measurements of disengagement in society are marked on profession, age or social status in society and this tends to be a global phenomenon. When disengagement does occur it leaves a huge impact on the psychological health of the elderly. (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 45)

Activity theory

This theory explains how an aging person sees oneself fitting into society which forms partly his self-concept and how other think about him. It is important that social workers are able to help the elderly make new roles to replace the old ones. For example, a loss of a job can lead to a person helping disadvantaged youth or find meaningful activities that will avoid the person to have a loss of self-concept. (Wallace 2007, 25)

It is important to note here that when one is providing activities for the age is to take individual differences into account. Giving the aged prescribed activities can also lead to a lower self-esteem. People who are more active in their old age have a greater self-esteem than their counterparts who are idle; they are also better able to help themselves and others in society. (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 45)

Continuity theory

This theory can well be described as totally the opposite to the disengagement theory. People focus more on life's satisfaction and continue to live the way they did before and one's personality or traits can be more pronounced during this period than ever before. It affects both women and men the same. People try to live like they did when they were young and this in itself can lead to depression amongst some elderly who are just unable. (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 46)

Many people think that with age we become more set in our way of when we were young. Nevertheless, old age or retirement could mean that we become even more active than ever in our golden years. For example, many people who take part in the church groups say that they have more time than ever to finally help the needs of those who are not so advantaged members of society. (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 71)

2.2.5 Successful Aging

According to Rowe & Kahn (1999, 39) successful aging is having the following attributes: a low risk of disease, high cognitive ability and physical endurance and active participation in life in general. Each component the author talks about builds upon each other. If the elderly are free from common illnesses and diseases, they obviously can maintain better cognitive and physical abilities. When an elderly or even young person has proper cognitive and physical endurance this obsessively adds to the full participation in life. If all these three factors are at a homeostasis level one can better understand what compromises the definition of successful living.

Successful aging is seen in many forms but most often displayed in two categories: getting along as social being and being productive for society's benefit. People are living longer than before thank to new medicines an education which focuses on prevention rather than cure. Unfortunately many old people avoid all the warning signs of old age and deny the vulnerability for diseases. Furthermore, to some elderly people in today's society going to the doctor can be perceived as a sense of weakness. (Rowe & Kahn 1999, 41)

It is the desire of everyone young and old to be independent. Living at home rather than an institution calls for greater demands on one's cognitive and physical needs. It is clear that scientific evidence points out that some loss of physical and cognitive abilities are intrinsic to old age itself and as a social worker it is important to keep this "natural fact" in mind. However it is much more easy for young and old to put blame on old age itself rather than loss of physical or mental endurance. Often problems stem from a poor diet, lack of exercise or insufficient mental stimulation. According to the research done by Rowe & Kahn (1999, 44-45) old people who were to train physically or mentally for a period of ten weeks can show dramatic signs of improvement to their overall wellbeing.

The last component here that is needed to mention is being productive and engaged in life. Many older people who do voluntary work for the community help their children and grand children out say that their roles are nothing. In reality, that's quite the contrary. Often when the elderly say they are not doing much they put themselves down which contributes to ageism and they fail to portray their strength to society in general. (Rowe & Kahn 1999, 47)

3 The Research Method and the Implementation of the Thesis

3.1 The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study is to address what age is and how it is perceived by two different age groups: the elderly themselves and degree students of Laurea University of Applied Sciences. In this study the interviewees are given the opportunity to reveal through data what old age means to them.

To gain the goals set for this study I will be using a qualitative research method and there will be two research questions posed for this study.

3.2 Research Questions

(1) How do elderly people perceive ageing?

- What are the elements that make a person old?

(2) How do degree students perceive age?

- Is there a difference in people interviewed: does it matter who defines old age?

3.3 Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research covers a broad range none being measured by numbers. Often this kind of method is preferred in social work. The researcher can focus on a small number of clients and uses intensive interviews to gather information for the research purposes. Even if the sample might be small in number the research is usually able to unearth large amount of information in the process. At times this helps narrow down an area of specialization or event related to the studies it self. (King, Keohane, & Verba 1994, 3)

The qualitative research method is best used in this research as it aims to give the perceptions of the informant's experiences and perceptions rather than a mathematical calculation of results. The styles of qualitative and quantitative research are largely separated. I have chosen qualitative research as my method for this study as my aim is to describe the thoughts of the elderly and the young and to explore different or similar experiences of both age groups. This approach allows me to explore and describe the interview subjects in depth. Qualitative approach will give my interview subjects ways to express themselves that otherwise quantitative methods would leave out. (King et al. 1994, 3)

In this work, a qualitative-humanistic approach aims to help to draw attention to certain points that other research has missed and to find room to open up the phenomenon of ageing. It also allows me to be more flexible in my research. If every study were just to use a statistical approach it could lead to many pitfalls of research and would not necessarily increase the understanding of human being which is the goal of qualitative research tradition. If the qualitative research method has not been used it could leave out a proper evaluation of social services for the elderly who are my subjects. (Shaw 2002, 27)

Qualitative Content Analysis

The data collected will be examined by content text analysis. Use of content analysis can be applied in many social work settings. The use of this method can be good as it helps when researching other studies to compare what has been left out and what needs to be further researched (Vonk et al. 2006, 124). However, another research goes on to say that this approach helps to analyse points of views in people, which is exactly the point of my research: to see what are the perceptions of old and young people alike. The goal of every researcher and student is to gain varied points of views (Oakley, Williams & Popay 1999, 72).

Content analysis proved the best method to analyse the conversations and the written parts from the students. Mainly qualitative content analysis is a straight forward method to allow me to sort out the information I have received into varied topics which I can explore in more detail. The idea of the method is to help to organize the mass of text into different categories in order to construct different thematic entities that are later connected to the theoretical base. Analysis of this form helps to understand the phenomena of the plight of the elderly. After examining the text it will help better see trends subjects and also for the reader when comparing to other studies (Dan & Kalof 2008, 105).

Using a content analysis method to make my research more specific, I can be creative in how detailed or wide my scope is by concentrating on words sentences or paragraphs. I have to remember not to go into to fine details as the research could prove to be very time consuming, but should also be of reasonable size to give a purpose of my research (Vonk et al. 2006, 126).

Authentic citations from people interviewed appear in the research report as a sign of reliability but also to make the report more interesting to read. (Neuendorf 2002) For a researcher, to work with the data means systematic search for new meanings (Hatch 2002, 148). By using content analysis my aim as a researcher is to understand and interpret the answers of the informant and then later put them into more abstract and theoretical context and form a wider picture of the phenomenon. Thus, the result of this research will be a dis-

course between theoretical understanding of old age and new information found through analysis of data.

3.4 Informants and Methods of Data Collection

I chose a total of nine people to participate in my study conducted here at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The people involved will be five students from Laurea and four elderly people from the city of Espoo. Participation from students and the elderly will be completely voluntary and by no means is any one forced to participate in the questionnaire. The identities of those who have been interviewed will not be noticeable or easy to trace protecting the identity of those interviewed and all information will be used solely for research and remain confidential.

The participants of the study were told before hand that an interview will take place and they are not obliged at all to participate in the interviews conducted. The participants were between (18-94) years of age. The participants were divided into two groups one group was the elderly and the other group the students at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The group of the elderly consisted of four participants and the other group of five students selected from the school.

Four of the elderly people interviewed were not keen on getting tape recorded as they somehow feared what their family might think, even though they were informed that all information given would be confidential. All the information that was given was written down by me and important points were emphasized. As the elderly spoke slowly and clearly I was able to document everything that was said, however it was at times difficult as the elderly some times switched from Swedish into Finnish.

The story telling method was used to secure authentic information of people and to give freedom for the respondents to give their personal views of old age with as little interference from the interview as possible, which was part of the purpose of this study. Story telling has long been used in social research as another way to understand a certain phenomenon in a full meaning. Stories can make social work visible that quantitative research would leave out. Moreover, it makes data collection interesting, as you can never know what issues, perceptions or other information might arise during the interviews as there is always an interactive process between the interviewer and the person interviewed. (Koch 1998, 1182; Denzin & Lincoln 2005, 456) After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, all data was collected and the remaining information was destroyed as required ethical conduct. Both Swedish and Finnish languages were used when I collected the data with the elderly as they

often changed the languages during the conversations; English was used with the students who participated during the data collection.

In my study I want to find out the experiences of my clients views and perceptions of what is old age. Much of the time researchers look at ways how to improve health services, but very often as I have noticed, fail to take care of what the clients have to say for themselves. If this was to happen people who are in charge of social services, they could find better ways to improve the quality of their programs offered (Bowling & Ebrahim 2005, 535). As a researcher I need to find ways to research that will not harm the subjects involved. This takes a lot of tact from my part, however, the participation from my clients will give them the confidence that their views do count and can be heard by society in general. To have an open and professional dialogue with my interview subjects will help take away the stigma and suspicion that often lingers around personal interviews (Bowling & Ebrahim 2005, 539).

The interviews had taken place in Espoo and degree students interviewed at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. No names or other information will be released and any personal information will be regarded in a most confidential manner. I used English as it is my mother tongue, but for the elderly who had trouble expressing themselves in English; freely used Finnish or Swedish as I also have a good proficiency on both languages.

I will have one to one interviews; one reason for this is that the elderly can also concentrate better if there are limited distractions around them. Moreover, with the elderly I will meet each one on a one to one basis, just the informant and me the researcher. For the students involved I will have the same questions for them but in a modified version and they will be allowed to fill out the questions posed in there own time at home. The questions will be open-ended which allows the subjects to widely express their opinions in a colourful manner. Another advantage that is evident to me is by conducting a one to one interview with the elderly as I have seen by other students who have done group interviews that it allows me to fully grasp and understand what the elderly person is trying to say without the distraction of others as there is only one voice to recognize it. This also helps my job when jotting down notes during the interview. The data once collected will then be examined with qualitative content analysis theme approach.

3.5 Implementation of the Study

The process of my study can be seen in this figure:

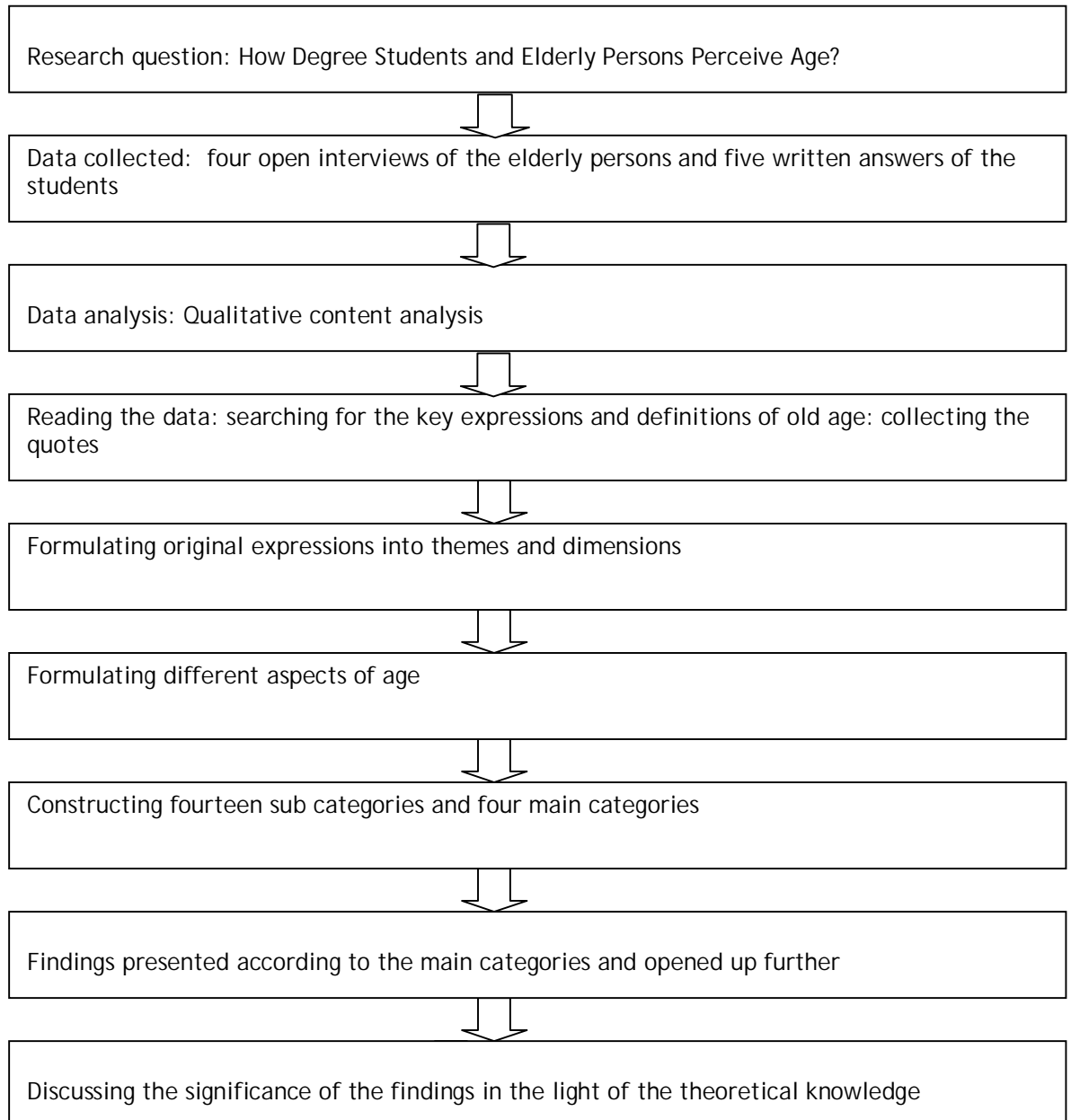


Figure 1. The implementation of the study.

4 Findings

The findings of this study are arranged to four main categories that try to illustrate the different aspects of ageing. However, the answers of the informants overlap each other and sometimes the same person finds the issue of ageing both positive and negative, as richness and deprivation at the same time.

The findings of this study are presented in figure 2 below.

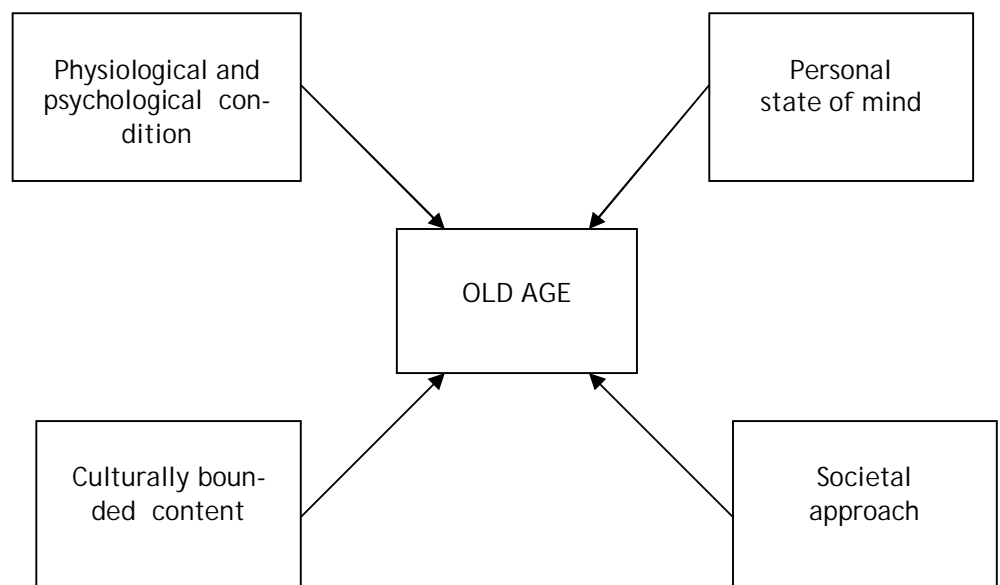


Figure 2. The elements of old are according to the informants.

4.1 Old people's view of ageing

In general, old people did not tend to see old age in a very positive light. However, there was a notable personal difference in the answers. The informants were very happy to discuss the matter since the feeling of neglect by society was a widely shared experience among interviewees.

4.1.1 Physiological and psychological condition

With physiological and psychological condition I refer to the facts such as weakness, illness, wrinkles and fears. Old age is something that the interviewees relate strongly to the physical and mental changes in the body. As the theory of normal old age notes (Kahn & Rowe 1998) the process of aging is an irreversible process that affects us all.

"Old age is to me when our body parts start to deteriorate and I loose my mental and physical health and sanity."

"To me aging is about each year getting in more and more bad condition each year I have a new pain some where in my body I get more weak and grey hair and expensive face creams no longer help me."

Health can naturally be a great source of satisfaction. Good care is also very important matter when old people estimate their quality of life.

"That I have a very good quality of care like in this old people's home."

"I love when even the workers come and touch me on the shoulder and look me in the eye and ask how my day was."

Physical limitations and illnesses are a natural part of ageing process. Somehow they are accepted as something that is unavoidable even though they are strongly limiting elderly people. What is positive here is that the old people emphasise the importance of staying physically as active as possible.

"I try to keep as busy as possible to overcome depression - - from Monday to Friday I have small errands like going to the doctor or some other things related to my health problems."

Psychological strength is important for successful ageing. Unfortunately, mental health is very difficult to define because of personal differentiation (Ebbasole et al. 2004, 616) and according to my own experience; it is often misunderstood in practise. A person who knows who she is, who has life experience and who is not scared of the future is a person that most likely will face ageing in a constructive way.

"Another point is about old age is that we don't fear death: I know many who fear death and that makes them more depressed I don't fear death too much any more."

"Age affects everyone. if I understand your question correctly then I guess if you are happy on the inside it does not matter our age or how old or sick I look, as long as I am comfortable with my age - - that's the most important thing."

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Many biological approaches state that the aging process is determined strongly by our genes. The interviews among old people proved that the definitions of old age depend also on a person's background factors such as social status or income (cf. Phillips et al. 2006; Arking 2006; Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 202-204).

"I have Osteoporosis, we did not have d-vitamin like the younger people do today they will be much healthier than I will be - - when we were young we just ate bread and fish there was no fruits or vegetables too much."

"How we age depends on the background we have come - - how our parents encouraged us to go on in life and also along time ago there was not the medicines available that make our life's more happy - - also I notice my friends who were brought up in the country side are much more happy than the city folks due to their more simple way of life."

Also, good standard of living has a positive connection to the successful ageing.

"I am happy that I have the opportunity to buy good medicine which makes me live longer so I can spend more time with my grand children as I love life."

"I also feel that I guess in Finland we have more opportunities than in some other countries."

4.1.2 Personal state of mind

With the personal state of mind I refer to the categories emerged from the data that touch the inner personal qualities of a person, the ways of perceiving life and understanding the world from the perspective of an old person. These categories refer to the social, religious and cognitive elements of age.

COGNITIVE CAPACITY

Many theories of age acknowledge how significant the cognitive capacity can be for an individual in the course of having a happy life. Intellectual side of life, education and titles have an important role of making individual content with the new situation. Education means for these people a vehicle they were able to climb up higher in society and to receive more appreciation that way.

"The fact that I was highly educated gave me better opportunities in life than many others who were at my age it makes me see life in a different light."

"I think in Finland people often judge you by your education nowadays but they did not so much in my generation. However being this old I understand what an asset it was to be educated."

CONCEPT OF TIME

A change in the concept of time is very essential characteristic of old age. As the psychosocial theories of aging note, the shifting concept of time and having more time is a greatly satisfying thing in old age. Time, if a person feels it can be used the best way, is a privilege, not a prison to live in. Life is seen as a trip where interviewees see themselves being at the end of the path.

"It gives me a more time to reflect on things I have done wrong or should have done in life I get to go through events with my sister that we have never brought up when we were younger."

"I have time to have in depth talks to my friends about the issue of death on an emotional level I feel more balanced."

"At thirty I felt so strong and the worlds was ahead of me but even when I was about the age of 45 years I started to feel my body could no longer do what it done when I was younger."

However, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Old people still plan their future and depending on their overall attitude on life they see tomorrow as positive thing. It is a great privilege to have time for the hobbies.

"To me it means I have time to read and have more time to reflect on things I have done in the past and maybe how I could do things in the future."

INTIMACY AND LOVE

According to my informants, the elements that make old age successful are strongly connected to social side of life, intimacy and love.

"That my family responds to my social needs and takes me on different outings I even get visits once a week, some people only get a few times a year here."

"To me if I had a richer social circle that would make old age more successful."

Physical contact is mentioned by three informants. The lack of physical touch distances the elderly also mentally and increases their feeling of being isolated, ill and not normal. They have a feeling that old age is totally separated and closed reality to the life they once lived.

"I cared for my children, changed their diapers and was close to them when they were small, but now no one seems to want to hug an old person. I think touch would help more old people like me."

"I want people to touch me more it would feel good if both workers and the young would touch us more - we don't bite and we are not full of diseases."

The strong bond between the spouses in marriage has been a cornerstone of happiness in life. A partner has a significant role in making one's life more meaningful and especially the offspring opens a new dimension that makes an old person to feel I've received something in life. The power of love is an amazing boost even to improve self-esteem and meaning of being. Strong experience of love, even if it had ended, can carry a person through the difficult things in old age.

"That I was over 44 years married has been the best step ever for me."

"My husband was the best emotional support to me he gave me the self confidence and space to make me the person I am - - it hurts so much to see him suffering from dementia, it's like I don't even know my husband any more."

"I was not able to have children. I guess my life would have had more meaning if I had my own family there is a certain feeling of emptiness due to the fact we could not have children."

"My husband is dead so I don't know at this age could I ever love some one as much as I loved my husband our generation don't accept so easy just to take a new person, its just not us."

SOCIAL CONTACTS

Solitude of old people is not a surprise in a society that celebrates individualism and youth. The elderly people are experiencing very deep loneliness even though they would still have family members and nursing staff around them. To live in a caring institution somehow draws the boundaries against "normal" society. Presumably, the feeling of being isolated is similar to those old people living on their own.

"I would like more people to come and visit me and respect what I have done for them as well."

Just as the psychological theory reminds, without social contacts and intimacy the elderly often feel alone or withdrawn from society.

"I long for more personal relationships I feel some times having age makes me feel like an outcast."

The feeling of being lonely is connected to the fact that with age there come illnesses and death. It is not that easy to create a new social network when the decades long marriage or friendship ends.

"I lost my wife and felt very lonely and isolated for many years and I could have done with more support during these times, I often talked to her even when she was gone - - other people must of thought I have gone crazy."

"I am so old, almost 100, all my good friends are dead and buried now; wish the younger people in my family would give me more time."

"Because of loss of my husband and I can't live with him any more - - loneliness is the biggest factor and most of all it hits me on the weekends."

"My friends around my age are dyeing."

The inability of being socially active again after the big losses in life is very big reason to be dissatisfied with life and prevents old people getting together with people with similar experiences.

"I am disappointed that other elderly don't reach out for others their own age - - there should be more clubs or society that could get us together - - we suffer too much from being alone."

SPIRITUALITY

I would have assumed the religious or spiritual dimension to be more present in the answers but only two of the interviewees talked about it. Nevertheless, for those people defining themselves as religious, religion gives them a deep meaning for being here and to live in a hope of afterlife. The aspect of social contacts should not be forgotten in religious activities, either.

"The religious services we have at the home every few weeks and the visits from the deaconess to our home make me happy. I like the hope it gives to us beyond our sickness and also the fact that most our friends our age have died recently."

"I don't have a religion and am atheist in my thinking but those who have a religion around me seem to be much happier".

4.1.3 Societal approach

"I feel that because of my age I am treated by younger people as if I couldn't make decisions myself."

Different expressions of undervaluation and loneliness are the most commonly mentioned negative things in the interviews. Feeling of not being heard by the community and the soci-

ety in general that doesn't treat this age group in dignified way are repeated over and over again. This remarkably negative side of ageing will be reflected later in these findings.

AGEISM

It is notably that the expectations of younger generation can be very different and the rejection by society gives the old people feeling of unworthiness. The rejection can be expressed in very subtle ways and younger people don't necessarily mean to discriminate through their comments.

"I have a longer time to process information and others wonder am I still all there?"

"When I was 45 I was classified as old back then but now that I am 94 years of age and classified as useless by society."

The feeling of unworthiness was reflected explicitly only by two of persons interviewed expressing the issue straight but that doesn't mean the feeling of unworthiness wouldn't be more general.

"Another wish I would have is to die peacefully in my sleep at the home and not in the hospital. I would like the younger generation to respect more as old people and please don't pity us."

Old people see younger people seeing them in very negative light. The elderly people experience a lack of respect and very easily see younger people's attitude being hostile toward them.

"When I get a computer into my home I can watch some church services by the net - - it will help me to see others. My family keeps saying maybe soon I will help you how to use the computer but as yet I have not received much help - - do they think I am that slow?"

Very often though, the idea of lost respect appears on the level of *feeling*. Old people feel that younger generation looks down on them but that is not necessarily the whole truth. Nevertheless, that alone is enough to consider the negative atmosphere of society as a serious matter.

"I feel that because of my age I am treated by younger people that I can't make decisions for my self."

"If I was to catch the bus I feel young people don't respect me, they feel they are more important maybe because they have been at work all day, they look down on me because I am old and play no important role to society any more."

"I take comments very hard if it is from the staff or younger people it hurts me greatly as the aging process will touch every one at some point."

Old people talk quite direct about discrimination but it gets many forms and thus it can be difficult to recognize as such. The picture that was constructed here about ageism matches very well with the theories of ageism (see chapter 3.2.1). Ageism as a social attitude is recognized in the answers of interviewees as a way of looking at older people. The feeling of not being treated as a normal human being but seen through the stereotype of an old person can be very harmful for the person's self-esteem. Just like the psychological theory of aging reminds (see chapter 3.3.3), our society values youth at the expense of age.

"Many people treat me like an invalid when they see how old I am and treat me like I have a disability or they think how can an old person like me have any good thing to contribute - - I have better knowledge of computers than some young people!"

Feeling of not being heard by the society is something that all elderly people mentioned in a form or another. Media is one to blame for many negative stereotypes of the elderly. There is also a need to express the voice of old people - if only someone would be listening to it.

"No body remembers us war veterans we build this country and we would appreciate if the younger people would still talk or thank us for the suffering we went through to have such a fine land Finland."

"The current market always seems to be targeted at the younger generation - What about us old people who need products that would be targeted for people over 60: where can I ever find these products?"

LACK OF CHOICE

Old age is a milestone where an individual has a time to reflect the past; being content with certain things and displeased, perhaps bitter with some things in life. Old people mentioned some issues relating to their past but that are burning questions today. Lack of choices and lost chances make them fretting what still could be done from their part if their wishes were better heard by younger generation.

"If I had more money I guess my social status could have been greatly improved but still I am happy with the care the state has given me."

"I would like to learn more about this internet thing, every one keeps talking about, I guess maybe I am too old but I don't know as I have not tried how it works yet."

"I think if people would encourage us to do more in our old age and believe that we can still contribute - - elderly people would not have to take so much medicine - - even if we had some little job it would make us move more."

4.1.4 Culturally bounded content

"It's when people don't work any more in Finland - then you are seen as old."

It is so evident that a person who is classified as an old person does not work any longer. That is why I think it was mentioned only by one person interviewed. Nevertheless, the interviewees reflected their experiences and thoughts relating to the time they were actively working and young.

What I found very interesting were the cultural variations when defining the elements of successful ageing. Because my informants were Swedish speaking vs. Finnish speaking by their mother tongue, they considered the Swedish language to be a key for better social networks.

"Even though my mother tongue is Finnish I felt that I get sometimes better service in the Swedish speaking home - not only that, we are such a small group of people in Finland, everyone knows everyone and we each in our own way try to help each other out."

"I feel my social life in the Swedish speaking community is richness and found that speaking two languages is a great asset."

4.2 Degree students' view of ageing

"People are different not because they are older and younger than each other but because they have different personalities, backgrounds and experiences."

In general, the students defined old age in a very similar way to the elderly. Thus, in similar way to the interviews of old people I constructed four main categories with several sub-categories stemming from the analysis of the students' written texts. Even though they seem to go along with the views expressed by the elderly there are some differences, of course.

"I have never related old age to anything positive."

Students were able to mention many negative aspects that they associate with old age. Luckily, the writings were not that negative at all that the quotation above might make you to think. It was quite surprising to note that one of the students considered older people to be more satisfied with their lives than younger people. According to the elderly, this is not necessarily the case.

The informants also emphasized that there is no absolute definition of old age. It is good to remember also as a social worker that we don't classify the clients according to our thinking or societal values.

4.2.1 Physiological and psychological condition

"I would compare it to a banana ripening because the appearance of the banana becomes less attractive over time but the inside becomes sweeter and better."

One of the students associated old age strictly to the age at the verge of death and thus saw hardly anything positive in old age. All the others stretched the concept of old age further, starting somewhere after retirement from work and mentioned many active substance that age can have. What was interesting here is that young people tend to emphasize ageing as a mental process, not seeing the physical side that crucial. This is good news as our society is emphasizing the look everywhere. But of course, physical decline is unavoidable character of old age.

"I relate old age to gradual physical/mental deterioration."

"We become not able to do things as we used to do before."

"We become sick - - brain cells "turning grey."

Expressions used characterizing the psychological sides of ageing are connected to the mind and brain.

"Becoming old and being old then again is something more in reference to the mind and does not need be connected to the physical age of a person."

"- - the mental capacity will decrease as well."

"People will be more liable to forget things - -"

Health was considered as a crucial element in getting happy life; if that is missing, it is hard to enjoy the final stage of life. Also, social contacts are seen as vital to stay content with your age. It was mentioned also how important it is to be balanced mentally about the past and present.

"You feel that you have used your life as you wanted to, and can accept things that you couldn't do."

Only one of the informants mentioned changes of personality as a sign of ageing and that was considered in negative terms.

"They become more stubborn, annoying and less attractive."

AGE AS A PROCESS

Also similar to the definitions of the elderly persons, old age is not seeing a static thing but rather a process. However, this is not seen the same as development when we use in rather a positive means with a maturity process of a young person.

"More often I relate aging as something happening to an adult body, when talking of the process happening in a child's body I would more use the word development."

4.2.2 Personal state of mind

"I definitely think age is a mindset."

Students seem to agree with the elderly persons that age is highly personal experience. Loneliness was mentioned by young people but the lack of social connections was not seen as that crucial fact as the elderly themselves considered that to be. Students rather assumed dependence of others, fears, rejection by society, loss of respect and lost privacy important.

"I think the negative aspect in our society is that an elderly person can have the feeling that s/he is cast aside after certain age, not needed, having no purpose in the world."

"- - eventually people end up in a state where no one respects their privacy."

"These people lose the last hope of being treated and seen as just another human being yearning for respect of having come so far in life."

Also, lost meaning of life and the inability of meeting the expectations of society add to the negative impact age might have.

"When you get older, you're supposed to have achieved a lot in life, too. It's the expectations that we put on the age. So if you're 50 years-old and live in a rental apartment then you might get negative feedback about your life."

Abundance of time was mentioned in many writings as a source of inspiration and chance for own interests.

"That's the period of life when you actually have time."

All the students mentioned the importance of attitude in order to change things but one of the informants also emphasized knowledge to be elemental in making the life of elderly bet-

ter. This perspective is often neglected in the theories and public discourses too. If we are living in an information society why wouldn't we see the knowledge of age as fundamental?

"I am sure that attitudes toward life as we know it, and knowledge about any diseases that may be relevant to a senior in question, will impact how they perceive their old age."

4.2.3 Societal approach

Half of the students seem to hold an assumption that when you become old, you will have less demand from society for you and considered that to be a positive thing. In a way it was told to be a positive thing that you have done your share: brought up your offspring, worked for decades etc. Nevertheless, I would say that the elderly feel that society is still requiring them to act or be a certain way.

STEREOTYPING

Young people know that culture of our time and media especially is to blame about the negative thoughts and stereotypes of ageing. And they are aware that their own negative thinking is very much influenced by the general atmosphere in society. Youth is seen as something desirable and media upholds assumptions of beauty, power and trendy to be the most wanted values.

"I know I should not be thinking about it in a negative and materialistic way. I sort of feel the need to blame the culture I grew up in, as senior citizens are hardly respected at all these days."

"I feel the media is largely to blame for the fact that old age is no longer respected."

"Youth seems to be the trend of the day."

"The main promotions - or propaganda might be a more appropriate term - of today are beauty surgeries, youth lotions and clothes that "will inevitably take years off your life".

"They (society) make it seem like it is really terrible thing for a woman to age."

FEARS

Very often, when students were defining old age, the answers given illustrate their own fears they connect to the age issue.

"I also fear the sagginess and the wrinkles."

"I think actually seeing old people naked at the swimming hall for example always makes me feel like I never want to age."

"People generally are scared from oldness, and I am one of them - -"

DISCRIMINATION

All the students told to be confident with their age but it is the society around them that makes them to feel uneasy about their age. Most of the students told that they have faced age discrimination of being "wrong age". Whether they are "too young" or "too old" for they look or experience.

"I tell them my age 22! They are choked they don't believe me and they say oh you are mature."

"I think most people still see me as a young person although I think the fact that my physical appearance (my face, the way I dress) and also sometimes the way I behave adds greatly to this effect."

Most often though, young people feel they are considered as too young. With youth come assumptions of naivety, inexperience or lack of knowledge.

"I think my age affects in a discriminatory way sometimes in the working world because people start with the assumption that since I am young, I cannot have a lot of experience or knowledge and that I probably have some self-esteem issues as well."

"Sometimes I feel that some people at a work place "little girl" me, maybe because of their low respect for young employees or just because they want to make me uncomfortable."

Sometimes the young age can be used as a direct tool of discrimination.

"Sometimes I also feel that work places that say they want to have "fresh eyes" in the team are in reality not so interested in a young person's comments."

There are very strong expectations in our society of what the "proper age" should be. It can hurt a person if society is treating her or him in a specific way due to the age given from outside.

"I have heard comments about having children; that because I'm of this age, I should have children right now."

"I am 23 years old. Many people say it is supposed to be the prime of someone's life."

"I am not 16 and I should not be treated as such."

4.2.4 Culturally bounded content

Two of the students referred to the cultural differences there are in the attitudes toward ageing. Similarly to the responses of the elderly, Finnish culture is not seen the best possible for the elderly on attitudinal level.

"Aging is successful in countries where there is great respect for the elderly and where the society is less individualistic."

"I can see that in my two countries - - getting old is something beautiful! Old person is the one who is more respected."

"In Finland for example, I feel that, if a person is old or not capable to do things correctly as the majority, we do not need him/her. Which means that the old people in Finland are kind of rejected by the society."

Words such as experience, wisdom and knowledge were used often in the definitions of an old person. They all form a picture of old age being some kind of achievement that should be respected. Moreover, it was stated in the views of the students that it is not the age that changes us but our experiences and the circumstances we are living in.

"I think being old or young is in reference to the life experience one has, the perspective it gives and the attitude one carries with."

"In my opinion getting older psychologically means that we collect life experiences and wisdom and we also become more mature in our actions and decisions."

"I associate age with experience and wisdom."

"In my opinion, old age is something to respect. Old people have much to teach the younger generations because they have experienced a lot."

5 Discussion

The final part of this study will be seeking for deeper meaning for the findings made from the data. I will also consider ethical aspect and trustworthiness of the study settings. Finally, I raise questions and recommendations for future studies.

5.1 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

All my chosen respondents come from Laurea and the elderly care unit. In regards to the information that they will give me regarding perception of what is old age, will be treated in a strict and very confidential manner to uphold all social workers' professional codes of practice and to protect the best interests of the humans involved. Interesting enough, I found out

that the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964 which helped guide ethical standards across the medical and social arena has much in common with our social worker code of ethics (Bowling & Ebrahim 2005, 555).

After an understanding of the Declaration of Helsinki and review of the schools and international code of ethics a signed consent form will be given to both the students and the elderly people to sign as a proof that I will uphold my obligations of privacy. I will not mention names or the name of the place where I do my research. All information that I have gathered in my research will be destroyed after the analysis has been made, and participants are free to see the results of the studies in my published thesis online or in the Laurea University of Applied Sciences. (Bowling & Ebrahim 2005, 555).

Regarding confidentiality in this report it is of utmost importance to get the first consent from the subjects themselves and uphold this agreement. Moreover, the use of my text and how I refine the data will help to protect my clients who have willingly participated in this research, not just as a student but as a professional social worker. It is my responsibility to protect my clients. If necessary, avoidance techniques can be used in the text the long term effects of the data given have to be considered. (Heaton 2004, 81)

The thesis I have chosen has been approved from Laurea University of Applied Sciences and the elderly care unit. I have been given the green light from my teachers to choose the best options for my research. After the basic understanding of research and social work ethics finding work that has been done in Finland or abroad proved very difficult indeed. Without doubt, if I had a better proficiency in the Finnish language I would have maybe able to see some research that could have been useful in my research. Secondly, also the fact that many of the clients I have interviewed their mother tongue has not been English which could also sway some of the results that were given.

There is a strong relationship between the interviewees and the interviewer and should be based on equality and respect and I refrained from interrupting the clients when conducting the interviews. All interviews were able to contribute on a full voluntary basis and were told that all information gathered will be destroyed after its use and in know way any of the information given could lead to identification of identities. As I translated the information from Swedish and Finnish to English I am posed or at risk of sometimes getting inaccurate data so I often had to use the online translator to get the full meaning of some very Finnish expressions often used like the word *Sisu* is often hard to translate in to the English language.

I have adhered to the Laurea University of Applied Sciences codes of research (2003) during the entire process of the research. I am also aware of the Finnish law about confidentiality

(Laki sosiaalihuollon asiakkaan asemasta ja oikeuksista 2000/812/15 §) when it comes to the issues such as getting permission of the client to conduct the interview, providing the interviewees with valid information of the research conducted and professional secrecy.

5.2 Discussion of the Findings

In this thesis I studied the concept of old age defined by elderly people and students. The study was carried out by using qualitative content analysis method on the informant's responses. The study aimed to give an opportunity to people to express their views on ageing. The core aspects of the findings that define old age were divided into four categories: physiological and psychological condition, personal state of mind, culturally bounded content and societal approach.

I found it surprising that there were so many similarities in the answers of the old and the young persons. It was also interesting that sometimes the presuppositions of the elderly about young people were wrong and vice versa. The students used expressions such as wisdom, maturity and achievements that age and experience can bring. They also think that the old generation fought for the country's independence and thereby we should have all the more reason to respect senior citizens.

Each student began their definition of old age with physical signs of ageing mentioning wrinkly skin, grey hair, bones getting weak among other things. From the physiological signs they tended to go to the psychological effects of age using expressions such as depression, memory losing its sharpness and brain activity getting slower. However, it was positive to notice that most of the young people defined old age in rather positive light as a whole. Only one of the students saw it in a rather pessimistic light.

It is notable that there is a conflict between the way old people feel they are not valued and young people who discuss the elderly in a positive way. However, the students are aware of the fact that society in general and this time does not respect the elderly and see ageing in a negative sense. They are also aware of the gap between generations that can lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings on both sides. According to my own experience in elderly care this fact is present in practical work surroundings: in the discussions between the staff members for example, where the client's behaviour and personality is categorized very easily.

In this regard, I think that there is a need for more knowledge on age in general and a need for fostering the link between different generations to break these misconceptions and increase the understanding of each other. This is important because one main reason that lies

behind prejudices is a lack of knowledge and thus, the more we know about ageing, the more we can understand a human being. This remark was made on attitudinal level: it would be important to become aware of attitudes and work with them.

What I found the most interesting was a kind of a societal mini-analysis that the respondents made while defining old age. The lack of dignity of elderly for instance, was seen connected to the general moral deprivation of society. I do not think this was intentional in most of the cases but it is certainly showing that young people are aware of the complex nature of the phenomenon and that they are able to problematize these issues related to age.

I was delighted to see that students were also able to analyze their own (young) age in a varied and constructive way in relation to the societal expectations. They know that historically these issues have not been always like it is now and thus they see that conceptions and images attached to old age are culturally constructed and thus relational; things could, or at least should, be different too.

I assume that the reason why my informants brought up the societal level of ageing was partly do with the fact that age is discussed a lot in the media nowadays. People are also aware that the population in Europe is ageing fast and they have an intuition that the needs of the elderly are not met. Also the pressure of fulfilling the ideal of "right age" has made people to protest against the culture that celebrates youth. I consider ageism as a major finding of this study to be very elemental to recognize in order to change the negative thoughts associated to old age.

Interestingly, both the young and the old describe very often discrimination due to their age. The responses matched well into the theoretical definition of ageism as a social attitude. However, it makes one to wonder what is the "perfect age"? The views expressed by both the old and the young strengthen the thought be critical on vague assumptions of what old age is and the chronological age factor that would give age a specified age limit. (Stuart-Hamilton 2006, 25)

Almost all my interviewees conducted their message in a concept of 'change'. It was used in various ways to describe different processes of age, whether they are on physical, societal or spiritual level. Even though the theory of normal old age claims that this changing process cannot be stopped, this makes you to wonder, is not the whole life of a human being about change? I think here again, we are touching the issue of ageism: we see old age in the light of change to something worse, something else the person used to be before.

What I found intriguing but not had a possibility to study in depth were cultural facts and societal norms of age. The cultural background has a major importance of how a person ages and how other people perceive ageing. I have a feeling that this area is not recognized or at least not visible enough in the theories of old age and it is not discussed in public much either. I do not think that people base their intuition merely on feelings but there really are elements that make Finnish society and culture hostile toward an old generation; at least the understanding stemming from many theories is based on a very Western cultural point of view (Vincent 1995, 157). It has to be noted also that young people reported age discrimination so it is not easy to be a young person either as a representative of Western culture; the demand for success is very high for young people. Maybe increasing multiculturalism can help Finnish society here in raising this issue when we compare traditions and see different ways of treating older people. In that sense cultural clash could be beneficial if we took it as a starting point for a learning process. At least it is a good thing that we get more professionals from diverse cultural background to work on social sector as they can be the tools to change the prevailing culture.

There were many aspects emerging from the analysis that would have been beneficial to open up in details but wasn't possible in this study like the fact that people from the higher economical classes of society suffer less from self esteem issues than those with lower socioeconomic status (Hooyman & Kiyak 2005, 202-204). Also, the meaning of religion or spirituality for elderly persons was rather vague for most of the informants. At the same time as the meaning of religion on personal and social level is vitally important for many elderly persons as they help in the search of meaning for afterlife and can reduce isolation (Harris 2007), religion is also highly private matter in our culture so we shouldn't make an assumption that religious dimension would increase the quality of life for every old person.

What would have been interesting to know but I did not reach much in this study were the role of elderly persons as active citizens. The fact that this was not mentioned makes me to think there is a very strong notion on "proper age" for a citizen as well. This is also related to ageism. Even though my responders mentioned many positive elements they attach to age they still tempted to think old age as a withdrawal from active participation on societal matters. This aspect seems to go hand in hand with the aspect of disengagement in the psychological theories of old age (Cumming & Henry 1961). The time fact that was mentioned several times could be a chance for a dedication for political-communal activities. Just as the continuity theory explains, the elderly may also continue to live the way they did before (Ebbasole et al. 2004). As the number of elderly citizens is increasing in the following decades so their significance in society is also increasing. The demographic change of Finnish people should be seen as an opportunity to see the elderly as useful in a variety of tasks that are either related to their own professional work or other competencies and voluntary work.

This study has many theoretical and practical implications. As there are a lot constant changes in our society we certainly need more understanding of age and age-related issues. Many issues such as the demands of working life, ideology of lifelong learning or healthy life style are not straight connected to the old age but they are actually part of the complex phenomenon. Thus, when we study old age we have to be aware of a particular societal context and through reflecting the events in society we can gain more knowledge on ageing. Theoretical implications of this study can be described as a deepening of understanding old age as a highly personal experience but which has a societal relevance as well. This study is partly a critique towards a traditional understanding of old age described outside the client's view that is present in the theories.

It is essential to reflect how these findings can be connected and used in real life in social sector. I hope that somehow my study is able to shed some light on the plight of the elderly and what does age mean to them. All issues that are related to the elderly in Finland should be addressed to improve their quality of life and to have the elderly participation in there. I sincerely hope that elderly participation in society can increase in the future and that they just don't need to rely on state insurance or the local city to support groups but that they could make and evolve their own groups that can help them come to terms with aging. As our society becomes more and more individualistic we often become disconnected to the needs of others in the process and forget the meaning of commune as a part of our wellbeing. Having an understanding of these perceptions can gain some understanding of the past and present to create a better understanding of the future.

The aim of this study was to address what age is and how it is perceived by two different age groups. The research questions were constructed to help to understand how and why the concepts of old age is different and similar between the young and the elderly. The results of this study were able to shed light to many elements of old age that were mainly supported by the theoretical framework of this study. Just as every theory is a key to a better understanding of the aging process (Ebersole, Hess & Luggen 2004, 30) the results stemming from the data of this study can offer multiple angles to reflect the issue.

The findings of this study can be easily connected to many previous researches that were presented in the theoretical framework. Nevertheless, I think that this study managed to illustrate more in-depth level of the phenomenon by bringing forth the stories of the informants. What I also see as very valuable contribution that other studies have not made, is to give a voice for the elderly themselves. This was also a motivation for me as a social worker to conduct such a research that would take the perspective of the client seriously.

I think that the method used in this study served the goal set. However, I still think that because of the limited number of the responders this study grasps only one corner of the issue. Because of this fact, I was careful not to make too much generalisation of the results. This is not the goal of qualitative research either since every case is unique or understanding people is considered more important than explaining. (King et al. 1994, 3) Although combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can be seen idealistic to secure the reliability of the study I noticed that qualitative approaches such as story telling method is capable to make the topic studied visible that quantitative approaches would not reach. Using story telling method did not only make many fine nuances visible but also made data collection interesting and opened up unexpected outcomes.

Finally, I felt that people were very happy to contribute to this study. Through this study I found it very important that the voice of the old people themselves was raised and I hope, also heard. I hope this work could make social workers to reflect the ways we classify customers of different age and also stay open to the suggestions they make about their own life. In the light of the results of this study, I would support the view of making old and young people to have more dialogue together to combat against stereotyping and discriminative attitudes of age. This could be used as a tool in social work to increase the understanding that age affects both young and old.

5.3 Suggestion for Future Studies

As a conclusion, my thoughts about further studies concern strongly the cultural and societal dimension of ageing. The findings of this study hint that it would be important to open up more a view that age is a culture and time related concept. At least in Finland, where immigration is still rather new matter; it would be beneficial to look age not just from the Western angle. I also support the view to take the voice of the clients more seriously in more extensive studies. This should be the interest not just of the market that sees the growing number of pensioners as a resource but also of social and nursing field to develop their understanding of the elderly and ultimately, to improve the life quality of the elderly.

Attempts should be made to understand the connection between self-perceived age and theoretical formulations of age. The self-perceptions of age reached in this study could be used for the re-theorizing age and for various educational purposes for working with the elderly.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Permission Form

Permission Form

Dear Director

I am a third year student at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. I ask that I would have the permission from Espoo city elderly care unit. I kindly ask for permission to carry out interviews with the elderly who reside at the home. This will be a big help in the completion of my thesis.

The main objectives of my interviews will be experiences of the perceptions of the old and young alike. Your participation will provide my research with important tools to have a better understanding of the plight of the elderly. The responses given will help my Safety and living thesis work which is currently being carried out at Laurea Otaniemi. My aim is to give a voice to the elderly and young which is the main purpose of my project. If your consent is given I may transcribe and reference your information given.

Your input is important to me so please be honest and feel free to answer the questions given, all information given will be confidential, no names or personal information will be released and you don't need to answer any questions you may feel uncomfortable with. If you have any further questions relating to my study please do not hesitate to contact me by E-mail or phone

Thanks for your contribution

Yours sincerely

Chris Poulter

E-Mail:

Signature of Director:

Appendix 2 Informed consent of the informant

INFORMED CONSENT OF THE INFORMANT

Dear informant as part of the legal requirement which bounds me this is an informed consent document. I am fully aware of the purpose of the study "What is old age" and by reading this agreement I have agreed to participate in this.

All information I receive from my research will be strictly confidential and tape recordings and documents will be destroyed afterwards. My guiding lecturers are Paula Lehto, Maria Suokannas and Pirkko Sassi.

I understand the facts and implications of this research and have the power to stop participating in this study at any point, I agree and I fully agree to participate in this study by my own free will however I would greatly appreciate your cooperation, as this form of research data is a necessary part of my final work.

Date:

Informants Name:

Signature:

Appendix 3 Consent Form

Consent Form

My Name is Chris Poulter, and I am in my Final year of the social services bachelor program. I study at the Laurea University of Applied Sciences Espoo. As part of my program requires a research thesis which is my current stage of development. The aim of my study is to find out how old and young people perceive age. I firmly believe that the voices of the clients or perceptions of old age have not been heard as much as it should have been.

To carry out my thesis, for Espoo city my working life partner, I will need 8 participants who are willing to carry out this research with me. I feel the best way to do this is to have a one to one interview with the elderly clients themselves and for the students in the class they can fill out the same questions I pose to the elderly in the comfort of their own home, this will help me better understand your views on old age.

I would be honoured if you would participate in my research, I would be happy if you could take time to fill out the questionnaire and for my interview with the elderly If I have your consent I will tape record the conversation as well as jotting down note to add more authenticity to my research and after transcribe the information given. All the information you give me will be dealt with in a confidential manner and anonymity of you will be protected at all times. All the information collected used in my research will be destroyed after its use.

Participation is voluntary and at any time you do not have to participate in the study at all, please if you are willing to be part of my research sign the informed consent of the informant signature part of this paper to show that you have understood the implications of this study.

Yours faithfully

Chris Poulter

Appendix 4 Questions

QUESTIONS

1. Shortly introduce yourself.

THEME I: What makes age (classifying age)

Please describe what is aging?

THEME II: Different aspects of age

What are the elements that make old age successful?

How do other people see your age?

What are the negative aspects of age?

Appendix 5 the Analysis of the Data: Example

The Analysis of the Data: Example

ORIGINAL EXPRESSION	THEMES & DIMENSIONS	ASPECTS	SUB-CATEGORY	MAIN CATEGORY
<i>"It's when people don't work any more in Finland then you are seen as old."</i>	Out of the working life Finnish culture	Retirement Cultural meanings disengagement	cultural differences	Culturally bounded content
<i>"When I was 45 I was classified as old back then but now that I am 94 years of age and classified as useless by society."</i>	neglect uselessness unworthiness loss of respect	Rejection disengagement discrimination stereotyping	Ageism	Societal approach
<i>"I don't have a religion and am atheist in my thinking but those who have a religion around me seem to be much happier."</i>	happiness religiosity	meaning of life loneliness	Spirituality social network	Personal state of mind
<i>"I have time to have in dept talks to my friends about the issue of depth on an emotional level I feel more balanced."</i>	time friendship emotional strength	social network emotional support	mental health concept of time	Physiological and psychological condition Personal state of mind
<i>"I think my age affects in a discriminatory way sometimes in the working world because people start with the assumption that since I am young, I cannot have a lot of experience or knowledge and that I probably have some self-esteem issues as well."</i>	Assumptions expectations no knowledge or experience self-esteem	Discrimination Stereotypes Mental health	Ageism	Physiological and psychological condition Societal approach

