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## Attitudes toward Young and Old People and Their Place in Poland's Changing Society

*Abstract:* The goal of the paper is to analyze how members of Polish society perceive young people (around 30 years of age) and old people (over 65), their social and cultural capital, their position in society, and the roles they should play in private and public life before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Polish society is aging and the birth rate is low. Analysis demonstrates that certain opinions about the old and young are common among Polish citizens and the factors that in other countries differentiate opinions in this regard do not do so in Poland. The image of older people is based on stereotypes. Young people in particular believe that seniors should not be active on the labor market or in politics but should provide informal help to the young generation in the private sphere. The young generation is more individualistically oriented, while older people are more concerned with the collective.

*Keywords:* aging, personal characteristics, attitudes, activities in public life, changing political context, role of the pandemic

### Introduction

Demographic changes have forced many societies to revise their views on the place and role that specific generations play (and should play) in economic, social, and cultural life. In the past, during periods of gradual change, emphasis was placed on the role of older, more experienced people in teaching younger people, in order not to squander achievements and to help the young avoid mistakes or minimize the consequences. Since the twentieth century—especially its second half—there has been an extraordinary acceleration of technological development, which has necessitated a reconsideration of how specific generations are able to use that advance. The change has been augmented by alterations in the demographic structure. During the Second World War, Europe sustained huge losses of people of productive age, but the continent soon experienced a demographic boom. Notably, Poland, like various other European countries, was rebuilding under entirely new political conditions. The young were expected to be ready to embrace changes and to adapt to the demands of evolving political, social, and cultural relations.

However, the second half of the twentieth century brought events that politicians did not anticipate. One of the more important was the rise of student movements in 1968, when the youth in countries with varying political systems demanded greater influence over the course taken by the state. Their postulates emphasized the need to satisfy not only people's

material needs but also post-materialist ones (Inglehart 1977), to redefine institutions, and to grant young people more agency. The older generations were portrayed as failing to keep pace with the latest challenges.

The last two decades have nevertheless demonstrated that economic transformations have placed young people in a difficult situation on the job market. They have been particularly affected by unemployment, and job insecurity has led to their precarization. The public sphere of political values—specifically, democracy and the free-market economy—has proven unsatisfactory to many young people. A number of studies (e.g., Inglehart, Welzel 2009; Inglehart 2019) have also noted an intensification of individualism, especially among the young.

According to politicians and economists, the view that young people, contrary to older generations, are a perfect match for contemporary mechanisms of development has proven premature. The ageing of European societies, mass migrations of young people abroad, the increased educational levels of people in different age cohorts, and growing life expectancy are changing the situation. A significant number of older people have been left outside the job market or broader activity in public life. They are relegated to the private sphere. In consequence, problems such as loneliness, lack of contacts with family members (who are no longer concentrated in a single neighborhood), and poverty caused by low pensions have been exacerbated.

The demographic changes described here call for the development of a special policy in regard to this social group. One approach is that such a policy should be exclusive, on the assumption that older people should not actively participate in public life but should remain in the private sphere, on the margins of social life. Another approach considers that they ought to remain active on the job market for as long as possible, while policy in their regard should be fundamentally inclusive, supporting their presence in public life in the broad sense. Social policies in individual countries differ and change over time, as has been shown by collections of articles dedicated to the problem in particular countries (cf., e.g., Magnus 2009; Gilbert 2004; Blum, Kuhlmann, Schubert 2020). Some solutions are premised on the idea that the burden of caring for older people should be carried by families, while others postulate that it is the state's responsibility to create a network of public and private institutions that would fulfill these tasks.

It is also debated whether older people should participate in social networks comprised by people of all ages or should remain the focus of specialized institutions created solely for them (clubs for senior citizens, universities of the third-age, etc.), and whether better results are achieved by companies whose employees are differentiated in terms of age or by ones hiring only younger people. Scholars have argued that it is necessary to reconsider the largely stereotypical assumption that people who have reached retirement age should devote themselves solely to the private sphere, where they are traditionally relegated, regardless of the age at which they retire and the nature of their professional activity. Studies conducted in recent years show that how employees are assessed depends not only on their age but also on their length of service and the age of the managers performing the assessment, many of whom hold positive views of older employees.

As Giddens argues, this has problematized ways of defining and redefining individual identity as well as the perception of others:

In many modern settings, individuals are caught up in a variety of differing encounters and milieux, each of which may call for different forms of “appropriate” behaviour. [...] On the one hand we find the type of person who constructs his identity around a set of fixed commitments, which act as a filter through which numerous different social environments are reacted to or interpreted. Such a person is a rigid traditionalist, in a compulsive sense, and refuses any relativism of context. On the other hand, in the case of a self which evaporates into the variegated contexts of action, we find the adaptive response which Erich Fromm has characterised as “authoritarian conformity.” (2006: 190)

Castells (2002) emphasizes that the “[c]onstruction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations” (7). He distinguishes three forms and sources that are crucial in the process of constructing identity: the legitimizing identity, introduced through dominant social institutions; the resistance identity, developed by those whose position is inferior and who are stigmatized by the logic of dominance; and finally, the project identity, which emerges when social actors develop or redefine their identity on the basis of available cultural materials (8).

As many scholars point out, views held by people depend on their individual life stories, membership in specific social groups, as well as age and social context (Hatch 2005).

Existing stereotypes make it difficult for people to alter their self-image and perception of others. Studies conducted in many countries have demonstrated the ubiquity of certain, often negative stereotypes about older people which are instilled in children during socialization. Young people often fail to verify these stereotypes in contact with actual older people. Moreover, they frequently have no need to do so because in many respects the two groups live in different social spheres. On reaching an older age, people often regard themselves in categories developed during their youth. In public discourse, older people are largely perceived as beneficiaries of health and care services, which reinforces the existing stereotype (Levy 2009; Szukalski 2008, 2009; Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2007). In fact, the constantly expanding group of older people is becoming increasingly differentiated in terms of their social and cultural capital.

### *Polish society as an object of study*

Like many other societies, Polish society has been ageing for a long time. During the last quarter century, the number of people over 60 increased by 3.5 million. It is predicted that the percentage of older people will keep rising, although Poland’s total population will decrease.

Due to increased access to education in the 1990s and 2000s the number of people in Poland with higher education surged, especially among women, who have comprised over half the total number of students and graduates since 1980. Currently, some of these people are now retiring, or have already done so. The restoration of lower retirement age in Poland in 2017 boosted their numbers more than would have been expected from a regular transition of generations.

This article focuses on how young and old people are perceived in Poland,<sup>1</sup> as well as on beliefs and stereotypes about their place and role in society, and the cultural capital at

<sup>1</sup> Analyses based on data from EVS-WVS studies carried out in 2017. The article also utilizes study results from the WVS (2012) and Values and Crisis in May 2020 supported by Maria Grzegorzewska University and Robert Zajonc Institute for Social Studies University of Warsaw. All of these studies were conducted on representative nationwide samples of Poles.

their disposal. The following analysis also aims to identify the factors that influenced these perceptions before and during the COVID-19 pandemic., and attitudes toward “others” during the sometimes traumatic experience of the pandemic. The last issue is very important because infection and death are more probable in the case of older people than in the case of the young. Older people need special protection and support to avoid risky situations. At the same time, some politicians and journalists have raised the question of whether younger or older people should get better treatment in hospitals in a situation where there is a scarcity of equipment.

The main hypotheses are as follows:

The various age cohorts have fairly similar perceptions of the differences in personal characteristics between young and older people in Polish society, and, more generally, perceptions do not depend on socio-demographic factors.

Perception of the socio-political context differentiates the perception of age characteristics to a small degree.

Young people are less sensitive to the life conditions of older people than older people are.

The pandemic is accelerating more individualistic attitudes among young people.

The analyses presented here are mainly based on the European Values Study/World Values Survey [EVS/WVS] conducted in 2017. Other data used in the paper have been collected within the framework of the WVS conducted in 2012 and the Values and Crisis study in May 2020 in Poland. The field work in all the studies was conducted by the CBOS [Social Opinion Research Center] on national representative samples, which in 2012 consisted of 966 respondents, in 2017, 1,352 respondents, and in 2020, 1,000 respondents. In 2020 the survey was done online.

### **Images of Young and Older People in Polish Society**

In the questionnaire for the EVS/WVS 2017 study, participants were asked about their perception of younger people (those around 30 years of age) and of people over 65. The characteristics were chosen to show the degree to which Polish society considers different generations possess the capital that facilitates developing an inclusive policy. The respondents were asked whether young people (around 30 years of age) and older people (over 65) were friendly toward others, worthy of respect, and competent. In this case the questions concerned a general view, that is, stereotypes about the members of certain age cohorts rather than areas in which these or other people were competent, to whom they were friendly and to whom not, and who was worthy of respect or not.

As **table 1** shows, the respondents tended to regard people over 65 as more friendly than people around 30 (55.6% and 51.3%, respectively) and as more worthy of respect (69.8% and 51.1%, respectively). At the same time, older people were less often regarded as competent (47.9%) than younger ones (54.87%). Analysis of the responses in respective age groups makes it possible to reconstruct the stereotypes that younger and older people hold about themselves (**table 2**). Older people regarded themselves as friendly and worthy of respect less often than the younger, but they also viewed themselves as more competent. On

Table 1  
**Attribution of some characteristics to younger and older people (%)**

Questions	Not at all = 1	Rather not	Difficult to say	Often	Very often = 5
Most people view people over 65 as friendly	5.4	9.7	29.3	35.7	20.0
Most people view people over 65 as competent	3.9	14.9	33.2	33.3	14.7
Most people view people over 65 as worthy of respect	3.3	6.6	20.1	36.7	33.2
Most people view people around 30 as friendly	2.5	11.2	34.9	34.6	16.8
Most people view people around 30 as competent	1.8	10.0	32.7	37.8	17.7
Most people view people around 30 as worthy of respect	1.8	10.4	36.5	34.2	17.1

Table 2  
**Percentage of the “very often” answers in younger and older age categories**

Questions	Respondents' age category			
	18–24	25–34	65–74	75 and more
Most people view people over 65 as friendly	18.2	19.0	10.8	17.8
Most people view people over 65 as competent	9.7	10.3	13.7	15.1
Most people view people over 65 as worthy of respect	37.2	33.9	24.5	30.1
Most people view people around 30 as friendly	17.5	13.8	16.7	19.5
Most people view people around 30 as competent	22.7	14.8	16.8	24.3
Most people view people around 30 as worthy of respect	21.5	17.0	17.9	16.3

the other hand, younger people were more inclined than older ones to perceive themselves as worthy of respect, but they less often regarded themselves as friendly and competent.

These results indicate the need for a more systematic study of the factors that differentiate the opinions presented in [table 1](#) and [2](#). The first hypothesis is that a vital role in the assessment of younger and older people may be played by the individual characteristics of the respondents and their perception of their own life situation. The second hypothesis is that people's approach to others is part of a set of attitudes developed in the broader context of state institutions and the respondents' lives. To verify these two hypotheses, two multiple-regression models were developed. In model I, which assumes the importance of the respondents' individual characteristics, the following independent variables were taken into account: age, sex, education, household income, population of the place of residence, assessment of one's health and happiness, attitude to selected values (free time, politics, religion), and recognition of the problems of older people. Model II assumes context-based variables as operands, differentiating the assessment of the “young” and the “old” in terms of the features discussed: age, sex, population of the place of residence, expectation of having insufficient resources upon reaching retirement age, trust in institutions such as the Church, the education system, the press, the police, parliament, the state administration, healthcare, the judiciary, political parties, and social media, and participation in systems of social support (having received free help and provided it during the last six months).

Table 3

**Summary of the results of multiple regression (model I)**

	People aged 65 and more are:			People around 30 are:		
	Friendly	Competent	Worthy of respect	Friendly	Competent	Worthy of respect
Constant	4.851***	4.258***	5.138***	3.682***	3.985***	4.337***
Age	-.002	-.004	-.007**	-.004	-.002	-.002
Population of the place of residence	-.015	-.003	-.017	.007	-.006	-.012
Education	-.001	-.005	-.003	.000	.004	-.017*
Household income	.010	.003	-.003	.017	-.008	.014
Sex (women)	-.177*	-.243***	-.054	.179	.138*	.169**
Importance of free time	-.076	-.019	-.066	-.128*	-.112*	-.102*
Importance of politics	-.117**	-.079*	-.098*	.011	.016	-.049
Importance of religion	-.133**	-.111**	-.052	-.044	-.013	-.105**
Being happy	.038	-.060	-.003	-.050	-.102	-.065
Being satisfy with health	-.096*	.003	-.002	-.074	-.081*	-.090*
Recognition of problems of the old people	-.119**	-.149***	-0.139***	-.013	-.003	-.009
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>.054</b>	<b>.058</b>	<b>.038</b>	<b>.031</b>	<b>.026</b>	<b>.045</b>
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>.043</b>	<b>.048</b>	<b>.027</b>	<b>.020</b>	<b>.015</b>	<b>.035</b>

The table includes standardised regression coefficients (beta); significance level:  $p < .001$ \*\*\*;  $.01$ \*\*;  $.05$ \*.

The predictors used in model I better explain assessments of the characteristics of older people rather than of the younger. However, the adjusted  $R^2$  was low in all cases. Relatively speaking, the most significant variables that help to explain opinions about older people being friendly and competent turned out to be sex, attitudes to religion and politics, and recognition of the problems of older people. Age raised the probability of a positive answer only in relation to the question of whether older people are worthy of respect. In the case of assessments about 30-year-olds, the adjusted  $R^2$  assumed even lower values. The most significant variables explaining the characteristics ascribed to 30-year-olds was the attitude to free time (when considered as an important value in life), as well as the respondent's sex and satisfaction with their health when responding to the question about being competent and worthy of respect. In the last case, one of the explanatory variables was the attitude to religion, but it was also weak.

As the next step, the model I of multiple regression analysis performed for particular age groups (not published for a sake of clarity) confirm much weaker explanatory power of the models in predicting opinions about youth than about old people.

In model II the included predictors also better explain assessments of older people than of 30-year-olds, but again only to a slight degree (see table 4). Sex (being male) and lack of trust in the Church played the largest role in this model as variables explaining assessments regarding the friendliness and competence of older people. Trust in the Church played a statistically significant role as a variable in explanations of all three analyzed characteristics (older people being friendly, competent, and worthy of respect); it was more important than trust in the other institutions accounted for in the analysis. Another significant variable in statistical terms was age, specifically in the model explaining views in regard to

Table 4

**Summary of the results of multiple regression (model II)**

	People aged 65 and more are:			People around 30 are:		
	Friendly	Competent	Worthy of respect	Friendly	Competent	Worthy of respect
Constant	4.632***	4.345***	5.064***	4.356***	4.457***	4.607***
Age	-.005**	.003	-.005**	-.001	-.003	-.002
Sex (women)	-.164**	-.252		.160**	.144**	.161**
Population of the place of residence	-.018	.006	-.020	.010	-.002	-.014
Lack of resources after retirement	.034	.024	.010	.026	.031	-.021
Trust in church	-0.157***	-.145***	-.065	-.046	-.039	-.058
Trust in the education system	.078	-.030	-.055	-.059	-.003	-.039
Trust in the press	-.086	-.027	-.019	-.048	-.036	-.032
Trust in the police	-.083	-.018	-.034	-.028	-.081	-.072
Trust in the parliament	.004	.001	-.043	-.044	-.038	-.095*
Trust in the administration	-.017	-.051	-.036	-.061	-.030	-.056
Trust in the healthcare	-.028	-.111**	-.036	-.027	.007	.025
Trust in the judiciary	-.006	.047	-.047	.032	.032	.036
Trust in political parties	-.011	.028	-.013	-.091	-.073	.062
Trust in social media	.017	-.090*	.017	.020	-.041	.023
Providing free help	.009	.015	.037	-.035	-.033	-.014
Benefitting from free help	-.084	-.089**	-.063	.000	.005	-.061
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>.046</b>	<b>.067</b>	<b>.041</b>	<b>.041</b>	<b>.034</b>	<b>.056</b>
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>.033</b>	<b>.055</b>	<b>.021</b>	<b>.028</b>	<b>.022</b>	<b>.044</b>

The table includes standardised regression coefficients (beta); significance level:  $p < .001$ \*\*\*;  $.01$ \*\*;  $.05$ \*

whether older people are worthy of social respect; furthermore, trust in the health service and benefitting from free help were significant predictors in relation to assessments about older people being competent. In the case of assessments of younger people, it was only sex that proved to be a statistically differentiating variable in relation to the three assessed characteristics.

Analysis of the above multiple regressions demonstrates that different factors are statistically significant (though very weak) predictors in explanations of the respondents' assessments of young and older people. However, the variables included in both models—as confirmed by the adjusted  $R^2$ —differentiate the attitudes studied only to a slight degree, affirming a far-reaching similarity in the assessments made by Poles in the case of the variables included in models I and II.

### Assessment of the Situation of Older People

Attitudes toward people of various age groups can, to some degree, influence the assessment of social policies pursued by the state. Sensitivity to specific needs can favor acceptance of

certain ways of supporting particular groups identified in terms of age and social role. For example, raising the retirement age in Poland met with social protests and caused the ruling coalition PO-PSL (Civic Platform-Polish People's Party) to lose power. On the other hand, society approves of the introduction of various benefits for certain social groups (e.g., the 500+ program covering all families with children) by the present ruling coalition headed by PiS (Law and Justice). Still, controversy continues over the redistribution of means, decisions regarding the extent of institutional support provided by the state, and whether the provision of means should remain the task of families.

Studies conducted in 2017 have demonstrated that a majority of respondents find the living conditions of older people in Poland to be an important issue (table 5). Almost 17% of the study participants declared being "very much interested" in this issue, while 47% were "much interested." Only the situation of the ill and the disabled was considered by the respondents to be equally important. Concern about the living conditions of the unemployed and immigrants was definitely lower. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (98.8%) shared the opinion that society should guarantee decent living conditions for old people.

Table 5

**Concern about the living conditions of various categories of people in 2017(%)**

To what extent do you feel concerned about the living conditions of the following groups living in your country:	very much	much	to a certain extent	not so much	not at all
old people	16.9	46.8	28.6	5.8	1.9
unemployed people	5.2	25.4	46.1	16.8	6.5
Immigrants	2.2	38.7	38.7	29.5	20.2
sick and disabled people	17.1	48.1	26.0	8.2	2.5

Interest in the living conditions of older people was less often declared by younger respondents, aged 18–34 (56%) than by older ones, aged 55–64 and 65–74 (around 70%). People with a high school or university education, pensioners, students, and wealthy people were more interested (around 70%) in the living conditions of older people than people with lower education, representatives of other occupational groups, the poor, or people living in small towns. 72.4% of the respondents viewed the importance of guaranteeing decent living conditions for older people as very important and 26.5% as rather important.

In summary, Polish society is aware of the poor living conditions of Polish senior citizens. It might be asked whether such concern stems from empathy with this group or from the fact that the situation affects younger people, who have to care for the older ones. Lack of appropriate institutional support, health care, and professional care services often force family members to look after their ill or infirm relatives themselves. Recently some attention has been devoted to studies on the conditions necessary to activate older people on the job market and their participation in various social networks (Léime et al. 2020) to improve their situation.

Table 6 presents the correlation between assessments of younger and older people and interest in (as well as evaluation of) the living conditions of senior citizens. In accord with

the results of earlier studies, it was assumed that concern for the living conditions of the older age group should be connected with assessment of their characteristics, unlike in the case of the assessment of 30-year-olds. The more positive assessments of older people (aged 65 and over) were more often tied to interest in their living conditions. All the correlations were low but statistically significant (the level of significance being higher than .05). However, these assessments were not correlated with the belief that proper remuneration should express respect for the achievements of individuals in this age group. This is understandable if the fact that only some people still work at that age is taken into account. As expected, the assessment of 30-year-olds as friendly, competent, and worthy of respect was not at all correlated with an interest in the living conditions of older people. This may confirm the thesis about the separated nature of the social spheres in which the two generations function. Such separate spheres might be connected with the belief that an appropriate remuneration constitutes an expression of respect mainly in the case of younger people.

Table 6

**Correlation between assessments of people aged thirty and over sixty-five, and the concerns about the living conditions of the older people (Pearson's r)**

Opinions about young and old people	Concerns about living condition of old people		
	concerned about the living conditions of the old people	convinced about the importance of showing recognition through respect and appropriate remuneration	afraid of insufficiency of resources after retiring
Most people view people over 65 as friendly	.077**	.030	.013
Most people view people over 65 as competent	.126***	.048	-.059**
Most people view people over 65 as worthy of respect	.078**	.083**	.048*
Most people view people around 30 as friendly	.031	.108***	.047
Most people view people around 30 as competent	.025	.074**	.029
Most people view people around 30 as worthy of respect	.048*	.100***	-.001

Significance level:  $p < .001$ \*\*\*;  $.01$ \*\*;  $.05$ \*.

### **The Place of Older People on the Job Market and Attitudes to Their Presence There**

The number of people approving the elimination of older people from the job market has been decreasing since the early 1990s. The idea that due to a scarcity of jobs older people should be forced to retire early was supported in 1990 by 57% of the population (60% of women and 54% of men), but in the mid-1990s, by 49% (47% of women and 51% of men). At the same time, 47% of respondents agreed with the view that in the case of a lack of jobs, reliable employees should be prioritized regardless of age. Others either did not hold an opinion on this matter (23%) or disagreed (19%). Younger people, both men and

women, those with higher education, white-collar workers, and people from cities with over five-hundred thousand inhabitants more often disagreed with the idea of dismissing people on the basis of age. Younger women less often accepted this view than older women and younger and older men.

Intercultural comparisons conducted in the same period have demonstrated that discrimination against women on the job market was more often accepted by people from post-communist countries, where the population holds generally more conservative views about the roles of men and women in society. This was a vital difference between these countries and most Western European countries (Basáñez, Siemieńska, Moreno 2010). In Poland, people with primary education, low income, and rightist views were more eager than others to eliminate older people from the job market (Baran 2006). In reality, reaching retirement age is usually connected with exclusion from the job market. In 2017, in the entire sample of people participating in the study, 45.3% worked at least 30 hours a week, 4.4% worked less than 30 hours, and 5.2% were self-employed. Among those aged 65–74, a total of 7.4% were employed, in the above three categories combined, and among those aged 75 and over, as few as 4.2% were employed. Only a small group continued to work in their occupations.

Often retiring does not mean that a person stops working but that the activity acquires the informal nature of unregistered, unpaid work, for instance, being of service to the younger generation or the disabled, mostly within the family. Older people play a significant role in performing tasks that Polish public institutions do not undertake. Table 7 shows how people at retirement age often remain “invisible,” delivering free services in the households of their close ones. The activities are congruent with Polish society’s belief (74.4% of respondents) that people have a duty to care for their parents and grandchildren. This belief is part of the traditional model of family relations in Poland (cf., e.g., Siemieńska 2010; Sikorska 2019). The number of people expecting help from their children is highest among the oldest, reaching over 90%. It is relatively lower among people with higher education. In reality, older people more often provide care services than are their beneficiaries (table 7).

Table 7

**Older people as givers and receivers of services during the last 6 months in 2017**  
(age categories constitute 100% in case of each type of given and received service)

Category of services	Help given <sup>a</sup> by			Help received <sup>a</sup> by		
	Total N = 100%	people aged 65–74 N = 100%	people aged 75 and more N = 100%	Total N = 100%	people aged 65–74 N = 100%	people aged 75 and more N = 100%
Shopping	19.7	17.2	9.8	6.9	12.2	18.6
Cleaning, cooking, Washing	16.8	13.5	7.0	7.0	10.4	15.9
Caring for disabled	12.8	14.8	8.7	2.4	3.7	7.1
Caring for children	16.7	17.3	3.2	—	—	—

<sup>a</sup> Sum of positive answers: every day, several times a week, once a week, several times a month.

In addition, older people are often active as volunteers in NGOs or informally helping other people. Their activity depends on their age. People aged 65–74 are more active than those aged 75 and over. Retired people more often participate in certain activities than peo-

ple from other age groups. For example, the meetings of housing associations are attended by 11.6% and 17.1% of people from these two groups, respectively, in comparison to 15% of all respondents of the national sample in 2017. They comprise a significant portion of people participating in meetings of residents: 20.9% and 17.7%, respectively, in comparison to 25.2% of all respondents, and in activities aimed at improving their immediate surroundings: 17.1% and 9.7%, respectively, in comparison to 24.0% of all respondents.

### **The Situation of Older People during the Pandemic, and Attitudes toward Them**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the economic situation of many employees and their families, and has affected the functioning of the entire society. The freezing of many branches of the economy, the introduction of remote, online work where possible, and the closing of day-care centers, kindergartens, and schools, has caused child care to be transferred to families. The definition by medical experts of people over 60 as a high-risk group which should limit its contacts with the “outside world” has created the need to modify social relations and develop new networks of support. In May 2020, 22.2% of respondents claimed that during pandemic they help more older members of their families than before. The most often people in age 55–64 (27%). But also the oldest respondents (in age over 65) were more involved in the help to the family seniors (20%) than before. 7.9% of seniors started to take care of preschool children and 10.6% for schoolchildren. At the same time, there was an increase in the number of older people who have received help since the outbreak of the pandemic, mainly in regard to household chores (cleaning, cooking, etc.) and shopping. 57.9% of the respondents declared that they had provided help to someone during the pandemic; these were more often young people aged 18–24 and 25–34 (in both groups over 60%), and people over 65 (10% less). The respondents received help less often: 12% of young people aged 18–34 and around 17% of the oldest group of people.

At the time of pandemic 10.6% of the respondents aged 65 and over had lost their jobs, and of these more were women (13.3%) than men (8.3%). Among the young, aged 18–24, the share was 17.6%, while among those aged 25–34 it was 15.8%. These two age groups proved to be running the highest risk of becoming unemployed during the pandemic. In the entire population the share was definitely lower, amounting to 10.6%.

The studies conducted in 2012 and 2020 allow the direction and degree of changes in attitudes and intergenerational relations in this new situation to be identified. In 2012 the statement that “old people are a burden for society” was supported by 22.8%, more often by women (24.2%) than by men (21.2%) and the most often by old people. In 2020 during the pandemic only by 14.8%. May be the exceptionally difficult situation of the old people caused more friendly attitudes toward them and closer mutual help within families at the time. The opinion “old people are a burden for society” was more often held by men than women, and more often by people aged 18–24 and by people aged 65 and over than by others. In both these groups the view was expressed by around 20% of the respondents, and more often by people with lower income, who were struggling with financial difficulties. It can be concluded that a strong awareness of the above-mentioned duty to care for one’s

parents and mutual support moderates the experience of the burden during the pandemic despite the increased scope of duties and frequent debates about who should have priority in access to hospitals and ventilators. The above-discussed differences in opinions regarding the place and role of the young and old in society are also reflected in answers to other questions asked in the study in May 2020. Despite that the pandemic had dramatically changed the situation on the labor market similar number of people in 2012 and 2020 believed that “companies employing young people have better results than those employing people of different ages.” In 2012, 21.9% and in 2020 22.3% of respondents. Both studies show that young people and the oldest ones were more inclined to believe that “companies employing young people have better results than those employing people of different ages.” In 2020 among those aged 18–24 this view was supported by 43.3%, while among those aged 65 and over only by 13%. They were men rather than women, mainly residents of small towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants), people with primary or secondary education, people employed as part-time workers or running households. In the case of the view that “older people have too much political influence” the number of people disapproving the role of the older generation increased over time from 35% in 2012 to 44.2% of the respondents in 2020. In the last study this view was supported by 76.6% of people aged 18–24 in comparison to 30.7% of those aged 65 and over. In both cases, the young people fundamentally differed not only from the oldest generation but generally from all who were older than themselves.

The intergenerational differences in general attitudes toward people deepen when compared to the findings of the WVS studies conducted in 2012 and 2020. Older people tend to be far more sensitive to the situation of others and to the overall quality of interpersonal relations. In 2020, the opinion that “one should be more sensitive and ready to help others” was supported by 65.7% of study participants aged 18–24 and 89.9% of those aged 65 and over, with the total percentage agreeing in the whole population being 77%. This marks a significant change in relation to 2012, when fewer people underlined the need to remain sensitive to the situation of others, and the difference between the youngest and oldest was much smaller. In the 2012 WVS study, the need for greater sensitivity to others was indicated by 48.7% of younger people and 55.4% of people aged 65 and over, while the percentage in the entire sample amounted to 55.7%. Similarly, the view that “currently it is more important to focus on dealing with one’s own matters without paying attention to others” was supported during the pandemic by 34.3% of young people and only 10.0% of people aged 65 and over, with a total of 23% of people in the entire sample. In 2012, the difference between the youngest and oldest in this respect amounted to only 12.7%, while in 2020 the difference was 24.3%. The above distribution of answers demonstrates the dramatic differences in the values that younger and older people wish to see adopted in private and public life in a crisis situation that is particularly threatening to older people.

There are also differences in the selection of goals that ought to be prioritized by the authorities. The aims that respondents were asked to choose among in 2012, 2017, and 2020 were derived from Inglehart’s scale of materialist and post-materialist values (Inglehart 1977, 2019). “Having more say in important government decisions” and “protecting freedom of speech” measure the post-materialist orientation, while the two others measure the materialist orientation. According to both generations, the important issues requiring urgent intervention by the state are mixed in nature.

In contrast to the young, the oldest prioritize “maintaining social order” and “having more say in important government decisions,” while the young more often indicate “the importance of fighting rising prices” and “protecting freedom of speech.” The last issue is relatively rarely listed by the respondents as a vital issue that needs adequate solutions, although support for it has clearly been rising since 2012, especially among the youngest (see table 8). Comparison with the results of studies conducted in 2012 show that intergenerational differences have deepened in the years 2012–2020.

Table 8  
Changes in the most important aims of the country (% of first choice)

	Maintaining social order			Having more say in important government decisions			Fighting rising prices			Protecting freedom of speech		
	2012	2017	2020	2012	2017	2020	2012	2017	2020	2012	2017	2020
Total	16.0	26.2	28.1	32.0	38.3	35.8	44.0	18.7	27.8	5.1	16.8	8.3
By gender												
F	16.5	27.3	24.7	32.4	34.6	33.6	43.7	20.9	30.9	4.6	17.2	10.8
M	15.6	25.0	31.5	31.6	42.4	38.1	44.2	16.3	24.6	5.5	16.3	5.7
By age												
18–24 years	16.5	32.0	19.5	27.1	35.7	36.7	48.6	14.6	26.6	5.9	17.8	17.2
25–34	12.5	28.2	30.9	31.2	38.1	31.0	47.5	18.6	30.6	5.4	15.2	7.5
35–44	16.3	17.7	27.3	32.6	41.2	25.4	46.6	22.5	42.6	2.9	18.7	4.7
45–54	16.0	21.4	23.3	32.1	36.0	39.8	45.0	21.8	27.4	5.0	20.9	9.5
55–64	14.0	24.3	36.6	34.5	45.3	33.0	42.3	16.7	24.0	6.4	13.7	6.5
65 and more	20.9	30.1	26.3	32.9	36.5	49.4	36.0	19.0	15.2	4.9	14.5	9.1

The results reflect radically different contexts: on the one hand, political ones (in 2012 and 2017 the change in ruling coalition from a liberal to a conservative one), and on the other hand, the experience of the pandemic when the study was conducted in 2020. In recent years, and especially in 2020, the youngest respondents (aged 18–24) strongly emphasized the need to protect freedom of speech and to have more say in important government decisions. They view these as crucial but endangered goals for Poland. At the same time, the rest of society has begun to indicate more often that maintaining social order is important for the country.

## Conclusions

Polish society is clearly divided in its perception of people of different ages, especially the youngest and oldest, and by their conviction of having different cultural and social capital, which can be important for the development of inclusive or exclusive attitudes regarding one’s place in society.

There is also a marked division in society in regard to the positive and negative characteristics ascribed to the young and old. Although we live in a changing world, where

different values and ideas are accepted, the assessments regarding specific age groups are still relatively homogenous. The attitudes of Poles toward older people are ambivalent and mostly based on stereotypes. Poles more often accept the view that older people are worthy of respect than that they are friendly or competent. Most respondents view the situation of older people as unsatisfactory. But younger people disapprove of their active participation in the job market, as well as in public and political life. In turn, analysis of the characteristics of 30-year-olds demonstrates that the assessments made by the respondents, and especially by men, were far more critical. Over half of all men, regardless of age, do not view the category of 30-year-olds as friendly or competent. In this respect, they clearly differ from women of all age groups, among whom over half think otherwise, considering 30-year-olds to be friendly, competent, and worthy of respect. The group of youngest respondents (aged 18–24) differs in these terms from the others, being relatively the most critical with regard to older people, and more inclined to have a positive view of people around 30 years of age.

Perhaps the reasons behind the above distribution of assessments could partially be traced to differences between the internalized roles played in society by men and women. Women are more often convinced that youth is an important form of capital that dwindles with age. Women's life experiences also more often reconcile them to their own marginalization and relegation to the private sphere in old age (Hatch 2005; Sikorska 2019). The individual situation of respondents, as well as their perception of the political system and its institutions, had only a slight impact on their images of the young and old, and thus the dominance of certain attitudes in society was demonstrated.

Despite changes in the structure of education in Polish society and the consequent increase in cultural capital of people retiring in recent years, the differences in terms of the views held by the young and old prove that the traditional image of older people perseveres alongside a traditional understanding of the roles played by specific generations in the general trajectory of life. Changes in cultural capital have not affected ideas about the place that older people should or could hold in society. The younger generation is convinced that older people should find their place outside the public sphere of life, the job market, and the realm of politics, remaining on the margin, confined to the world of institutions created especially for them, and becoming more engaged in activities within the private sphere. Additionally, young people are themselves oriented toward the realization of individual, materialist goals; their system of values thus differs from the system embraced by older people, who more often have a collectivist attitude which takes into account the interests of weaker social groups.

The sense of uncertainty has greatly intensified during the pandemic. The young, who are oriented toward the realization of consumerist goals, are increasingly afraid that their chances at attaining their goals are becoming limited. As the key tasks of the state, they emphasize the importance of material goals. They express disapproval for the growing group of older people, whose number and significantly greater cultural capital than in the past allow them to compete with the young in the public sphere, decreasing the potential of the young to achieve their goals. In recognizing this threat, the young are at the same time increasingly more vocal than any other social group about guarantees of freedom of speech. The state is expected to provide greater agency to the young to combine materialist and

post-materialist values (as described by Inglehart) in a political system that is expected to guarantee civil liberties.

As has been demonstrated, the hypotheses formulated at the beginning of the paper were supported by the empirical findings.

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