



# Attitudes of Poles and Belarusians towards older people – a cross-cultural study

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## Abstract

**Introduction and Objective.** Attitudes toward seniors are indicators of the quality of relations in society. Nationality and place of residence may be the factors that differentiate these attitudes. The aim of the study was to discover whether there are differences in attitudes towards seniors depending on the place of residence and nationality, with reference to Poland-Belarus.

**Materials and Method.** The study included a group of 881 people (527 Poles and 354 Belarusians) with the variable of place of residence. The Scale of Attitudes Toward Seniors (SPWS) developed by J. Łukasiewicz and W. Kowalski was used.

**Results.** Poles scored significantly higher than Belarusians on the Respect and Support scale –  $4.60 \pm 0.59$  versus  $4.39 \pm 0.64$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), as well as on the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale –  $3.62 \pm 0.66$  versus  $3.45 \pm 0.63$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). In contrast, on the Social Distance scale, Belarusians had average scores of  $2.91 \pm 0.56$ , which were significantly higher than those of Poles ( $p < 0.001$ ). Two-factor ANOVA also showed statistically significant differences on the Respect and Support scale, taking into consideration nationality ( $p = 0.005$ ) and place of residence ( $p < 0.001$ ), as well as in the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale by nationality ( $p = 0.001$ ). There were no statistically significant differences in the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale by place of residence ( $p = 0.664$ ).

**Conclusions.** Improving the quality of life and standards of care for the elderly is conducive to shaping positive attitudes between generations. Cultural patterns, such as the image of the family and ways of communication in intergenerational relationships, are important for building the correct image of older people and their role in society. Awareness of the changes that occur in old age may be important for shaping the positive image of seniors among the young generation.

## Key words

attitude, rural population, urban population, residence characteristics, senior citizen

## INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

Aging is a natural and inevitable stage of human existence. It is inextricably linked with the physical changes that occur in the human body, the exit from certain social roles – primarily those related to career – and the need to accept new life roles. The content and form of these roles are, among others, the result of cultural patterns concerning old age [1–3]. The ability to adapt to a new reality is an essential element of the entire aging process, and refers to the characteristic resources of the elderly and their physical and mental abilities [4–6]. The faces of old age differ and constitute a certain balance not only of previous stages of life but also of adaptation to entering the senior stage. During this period, unforeseen circumstances that may be related to health or the family situation may occur [7–10].

It is important to learn about social attitudes towards older people because common views on life and human development may lead to the mistreatment of seniors in society and, as a result, may be linked to lowering their self-esteem and a decline in the sense of quality of life among older people. However, recent research shows that in subsequent generations of respondents there is an increase

in approval and favour towards older people. It is worth adding that research on attitudes towards old people is inconclusive. Some researchers note that the respondents' negative attitudes towards aging and old age intensify in late adulthood. It can be assumed that the attitudes towards seniors will vary, among other things, depending on cultural stereotypes related to belonging to a specific nation [2, 11, 12]. Although Poland and Belarus directly border each other, the history of these nations, even over the last few decades, is quite different [9, 13]. Hence the idea to compare attitudes towards seniors among representatives of these nationalities, also taking into account the place of residence.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study used the SPWS Scale by J. Łukasiewicz and W. Kowalski [14], which was prepared on the basis of beliefs about the existence of common stereotypes, which are a source for the formation of attitudes in society towards seniors [15]. Referring to factor analysis, 3 SPWS factors – Respect and Support, Repulsion and Misunderstanding, and Social Distance – were listed. Cronbach's alpha for the mentioned scales was 0.93, 0.86 and 0.70, respectively. A high score on the Respect and Support scale refers to people who reveal a high degree of respect and attentiveness in their attitudes toward seniors, evoke positive emotions and a desire

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to take care of them and provide positive support. At the root of this attitude is the belief that seniors are characterized by wisdom through an extensive experience of life, and their willingness to share with others the qualities they possess, especially with the younger generation. For them, the elderly, through their lives, personalities and knowledge, are of great value to the family, society as a whole, and especially to the younger generation. A high score on the Repulsion and Misunderstanding scale describes an attitude that negatively views seniors (high score). At the root of such attitudes are negative personality traits, and, above all, hostile behaviour toward others, especially towards the younger generation. Among such pejoratives are irritability, apparent dissatisfaction with life, lack of an idea for their own lives and boredom with life. A consequence of such behaviour is isolation and the experience of loneliness by the elderly, distance and closure to loved ones. All this further compounds the problems and dissatisfaction of the elderly. Social distance denotes a peculiar attitude of the younger generation of isolation, or rather keeping at a distance from the elderly. A high score on this scale underscores public awareness of the economic and social well-being of seniors. However, the excessive focus of the elderly on increasing the comfort of their lives (especially the accumulation of material goods) without considering the needs of others – is a source of negative references and emotional (life) distance from seniors [16–20].

The study was carried out in four regions of Belarus (Grodno, Minsk, Brest, Mozyr) in cooperation with the staff and students of the A. S. Pushkin State University in Brest, and five regions of Poland (Lublin, Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań and Gdańsk), in cooperation with WSEI University in Lublin, taking into account the rural and urban environment. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail and post to various centres and institutions. The survey in Online and paper form was conducted among students and adults who volunteered to participate in the study. A total of 881 people took part in the study. Inclusion criteria were age up to 65 years and informed consent to participate voluntarily and anonymously. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how to complete the questionnaire.

The characteristics of respondents from Poland and Belarus who took part in the study are presented in Table 1. Comparing respondents from Poland and Belarus, it can be noticed that in the Polish group there was a higher percentage of women (86.15% compared to 69.77%), respondents living in rural areas (44.59% compared to 14.41%), married couples (52.18% compared to 12.99%), and respondents with tertiary education (55.98% compared to 25.42%). The majority of respondents in both groups came from complete families (87.67% of Poles and 79.94% of Belarusians), had siblings (92.60% and 79.66%) and had ever lived with grandparents (61.67% and 62.15%). More than half of the Polish respondents had children (55.22%), while among Belarusians the percentage with children was only 9.04%. Poles were much more likely to study or work at the same time (70.59% compared to 27.68% of Belarusians). Detailed characteristics of the study population are presented in Table 1.

**Statistical analysis.** The normality of the distribution of the SPWS scale scores in the groups was examined by calculating the Lilliefors test. It turned out that the distribution in many cases deviated significantly from the normal, but due to the

large number of groups, the Central Limit Theorem was applied and parametric tests selected, such as the Student's t-test for comparing Poles and Belarusians, and the ANOVA test for comparing residents of villages, cities with up to 100,000 inhabitants and over 100,000 inhabitants. In addition to the ANOVA test, Tukey's *post-hoc* test was calculated for statistically significant results. A two-way ANOVA and Tukey's *post-hoc* test were also used to examine the impact of the interaction of nationality and place of residence on attitudes towards seniors. Statistica 13.3 (TIBCO Software Inc., 2017), Statistica version 13 (<http://statistica.io>) and IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.0.1.0 (142) were used to develop the research results..

## RESULTS

In the analyses of attitudes towards seniors measured with the SPWS scale, respondents obtained the highest results in attitudes related to Respect and Support – an average of  $4.52 \pm 0.62$  points and  $5.81 \pm 1.81$  sten. In the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale, the mean score was significantly lower and amounted to  $3.55 \pm 0.65$ , while in the Social Distance scale the lowest score was observed, an average of  $2.71 \pm 0.55$ . The sten results, on the other hand, were the opposite – the average result for the Social Distance scale was  $5.28 \pm 1.85$ , and for the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale  $5.0 \pm 1.98$  (Tab. 2).

Poles achieved significantly higher scores than Belarusians on the Respect and Support scale –  $4.60 \pm 0.59$  compared to  $4.39 \pm 0.64$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), as well as the results on the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale –  $3.62 \pm 0.66$  compared to  $3.45 \pm 0.63$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). However, on the Social Distance scale, Belarusians had average results of  $2.91 \pm 0.56$ , which were significantly higher than Poles ( $p < 0.001$ ). Cohen's *d* values indicated average differences between Poles and Belarusians for all scales.

The ANOVA test also indicated statistically significant differences in the Respect and Support scale scores depending on the place of residence ( $p < 0.001$  for both analyses). Tukey's *post-hoc* test showed that there were statistically significant differences in Respect and Support between residents of cities with over 100,000 inhabitants and inhabitants of rural areas ( $p < 0.001$ ), and inhabitants of cities up to 100,000 inhabitants ( $p < 0.001$ ). Significantly lower results on this scale were obtained by respondents living in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants. However, no significant differences in relation to place of residence were found in attitudes towards seniors in the case of the Rejection and Misunderstanding and Social Distance scales. The  $\eta^2$  value for a statistically significant result indicates that the place of residence explains 4.5% of the variability of the Respect and Support scale, which is a weak effect. Comparison of the results of the SPWS scale among Poles and Belarusians, depending on the place of residence is presented in Table 3.

In order to deepen the analysis and examine whether there is a simultaneous impact of nationality and place of residence on attitudes towards seniors, an additional two-factor ANOVA was conducted (Tab. 4).

Two-way ANOVA also showed statistically significant differences in the Respect and Support scale depending on nationality ( $p = 0.005$ ) and place of residence ( $p < 0.001$ ), as well as in the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale in relation

**Table 1.** Comparison of demographic characteristics of people from Poland and Belarus

Country		Poland (n=527)		Belarus (n=354)		Total (n=881)	
Variables		M±SD	Me (Min; Max)	M±SD	Me (Min; Max)	M±SD	Me (Min; Max)
Age		32.0±9.98	31 (15; 56)	20.70±5.15	19 (17; 65)	27.46±10.05	24 (15; 65)
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender	Females	454	86.15	247	69.77	701	79.57
	Males	73	13.85	107	30.23	180	20.43
Place of residence	Village	235	44.59	51	14.41	286	32.46
	City with population up to 100,000 inhabitants	144	27.32	95	26.83	239	27.13
	City with population over 100,000 inhabitants	148	28.09	208	58.76	356	40.41
Marital status	Single	211	40.04	300	84.75	511	58.0
	Married	275	52.18	46	12.99	321	36.44
	Divorced	35	6.64	8	2.26	43	4.88
	Widow/widower	6	1.14	0	0.0	6	0.68
Education	Elementary	21	3.98	30	8.47	51	5.79
	Secondary	211	40.04	234	66.10	445	50.51
	Higher education	295	55.98	90	25.42	385	43.70
Family composition	Complete (mother and father)	462	87.67	283	79.94	745	84.56
	Stepfamily	8	1.52	12	3.39	20	2.27
	Single-parent family (only mother)	49	9.30	56	15.82	105	11.92
	Single-parent family (only father)	8	1.52	3	0.85	11	1.25
Children	Yes	291	55.22	32	9.04	323	36.66
	No	236	44.78	322	90.96	558	63.34
Professional situation	I work	7	1.33	15	4.24	22	2.50
	I study	145	27.51	235	66.38	380	43.13
	I work and study	372	70.59	98	27.68	470	53.35
	I am unemployed	3	0.57	6	1.69	9	1.02
Siblings	Yes	488	92.60	282	79.66	770	87.40
	No	39	7.40	72	20.34	111	12.60
Lived / live with grandparents	Yes	325	61.67	220	62.15	545	61.86
	No	202	38.33	134	37.85	336	38.14

**Table 2.** Scores and sten scores of the SPWS scales

Scale		Scores					Sten scores				
		M	SD	Me	Min	Max	M	SD	Me	Min	Max
Attitudes towards Seniors Scale (SPWS)	Respect and support	4.52	0.62	4.57	1.10	6.0	5.81	1.81	6.0	1.0	10.0
	Rejection and misunderstanding	3.55	0.65	3.53	1.42	6.0	5.0	1.98	5.0	1.0	10.0
	Social distance	2.71	0.55	2.73	1.18	6.0	5.28	1.85	5.0	1.0	10.0

to nationality ( $p=0.001$ ). On the other hand, statistically insignificant differences were found in the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale depending on the place of residence ( $p=0.664$ ). Nationality explained less than 1% of the variance in the Respect and Support scale and 1.2% of the variance in the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale. Therefore the effect in the case of nationality was weak. Place of residence explained 3.1% of the variability of the Respect and Support scale; also in this case the effect can be described as weak. However, there was no significant interaction effect of nationality and place of residence on Respect and Support ( $p=0.138$ ) and Rejection and Misunderstanding ( $p=0.751$ ).

The results of the two-way ANOVA for the Social Distance scale showed significant differences depending on nationality

( $p<0.001$ ) and place of residence ( $p=0.022$ ). It also turned out that the interaction of nationality and place of residence significantly affected the Social Distance scale ( $p=0.028$ ). Nationality explained 10.2% of the variation in the Social Distance scale, which indicated a medium effect, while place of residence explained less than 1%, which indicated a weak effect. The interaction effect of nationality and place of residence on Social Distance was also weak ( $\eta^2 = 0.008$ ). Table 5 presents descriptive statistics for the Respect and Support, Rejection and Misunderstanding and Social Distance scales depending on place of residence, separately for Poles and Belarusians.

Two-way ANOVA showed that the interaction of nationality and place of residence had a statistically

**Table 3.** Comparison of attitudes towards seniors measured by the SPWS scale, depending on nationality and place of residence

SPWS Scale	Nationality	Score		Student's t-test			Place of residence		Score		ANOVA test			
		M±SD	t	df	p	d Cohena	M±SD	F	df	p	η <sup>2</sup>			
Respect and support	Polish	4.60±0.59					Village		4.66±0.54					
	Belarussian	4.39±0.64	4.917	879	<0.001	0.613	City with population up to 100,000 inhabitants		4.58±0.60		20.866	2; 878	<0.001	0.045
							City with population over 100,000 inhabitants		4.36±0.66					
Rejection and misunderstanding	Polish	3.62±0.66					Village		3.59±0.62					
	Belarussian	3.45±0.63	3.669	879	<0.001	0.648	City with population up to 100,000 inhabitants		3.52±0.63		0.677	2; 878	0.508	0.002
							City with population over 100,000 inhabitants		3.54±0.69					
Social Distance	Polish	2.58±0.49					Village		2.71±0.49					
	Belarussian	2.91±0.56	-9.383	879	<0.001	0.521	City with population up to 100,000 inhabitants		2.71±0.58		0.088	2; 878	0.916	<0.001
							City with population over 100,000 inhabitants		2.72±0.57					

**Table 4.** Comparison of attitudes towards seniors measured by the SPWS scale, depending on nationality and place of residence – two-way ANOVA

Variable	Respect nad Support				Rejection and Misunderstanding				Social Distance			
	F	df	p	η <sup>2</sup>	F	df	p	η <sup>2</sup>	F	df	p	η <sup>2</sup>
Nationality	7.91	1; 875	0.005	0.009	10.45	1; 875	0.001	0.012	99.29	1; 875	<0.001	0.102
Place of residence	13.93	2; 875	<0.001	0.031	0.41	2; 875	0.664	0.001	3.82	2; 875	0.022	0.009
Nationality / Place of residence	1.99	2; 875	0.138	0.005	0.29	2; 875	0.751	0.001	3.58	2; 875	0.028	0.008

**Table 5.** Comparison of attitudes towards seniors measured by the SPWS scale depending on nationality and place of residence – descriptive statistics

SPWS scale	Nationality	Place of residence	M±SD	M±SD
Respect and support	Poles	Village	4.66±0.54	
		City up to 100,000 inhabitants	4.68±0.49	
		City with over 100,000 inhabitants	4.41±0.72	
	Belarusians	Village	4.63±0.54	
		City up to 100,000 inhabitants	4.42±0.72	
		City with over 100,000 inhabitants	4.32±0.61	
Rejection and misunderstanding	Poles	Village	3.61±0.63	
		City up to 100,000 inhabitants	3.58±0.65	
		City with over 100,000 inhabitants	3.66±0.70	
	Belarusians	Village	3.48±0.57	
		City up to 100,000 inhabitants	3.44±0.60	
		City with over 100,000 inhabitants	3.45±0.67	
Social distance	Poles	Village	2.64±0.48	
		City up to 100,000 inhabitants	2.50±0.48	
		City with over 100,000 inhabitants	2.56±0.52	
	Belarusians	Village	3.02±0.42	
		City up to 100,000 inhabitants	3.02±0.58	
		City with over 100,000 inhabitants	2.84±0.57	

significant effect on the Social Distance scale. Analysis of descriptive statistics shows that in the group of Poles there was a clear difference between rural and urban areas with up to 100,000 inhabitants, while among Belarusians there was almost no difference between these categories. Among Belarusians, however, a clear difference could be noted between the inhabitants of cities with over 100,000 inhabitants and those living in cities up to 100,000 inhabitants, while in the group of Poles the difference between these categories was small. However, Tukey's *post-hoc* test did not reveal that the differences specified were statistically

significant, neither in the group of Poles nor in the group of Belarusians. It only pointed to significant differences in Social Distance between Poles and Belarusians, regardless of place of residence, which was noticed in the previous analysis ( $p < 0.001$  for each comparison).

In the case of the Respect and Support scale, significant differences were demonstrated using Tukey's *post-hoc* test between Poles living in the countryside and Belarusians living in cities up to 100,000 inhabitants ( $p = 0.013$ ) and in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants ( $p < 0.001$ ), and between Poles living in cities with up to 100,000 inhabitants, and Belarusians living in cities with up to 100,000 ( $p = 0.014$ ) and above 100,000 inhabitants ( $p < 0.001$ ). In every case, Poles had higher scores than Belarusians on the Respect and Support scale.

On the Rejection and Misunderstanding scale, Tukey's *post-hoc* test indicated differences only between Poles and Belarusians living in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants ( $p = 0.032$ ). The average result for Poles was  $3.66 \pm 0.70$ , which was much higher than the average result for Belarusians –  $3.45 \pm 0.67$ .

## DISCUSSION

The analyses conducted clearly indicate that Poles obtained significantly higher results on the Respect and Support and Rejection and Misunderstanding scales, while Belarusians had higher results on the Social Distance scale. The surveyed Poles were more characterized by a positive attitude towards older people, appreciation of their life experience, empathy, and willingness to share knowledge, compared to the surveyed Belarusians. This attitude applies primarily to rural residents. When it comes to Belarusians, this tendency decreased among people living in cities. There was no such relationship regarding the Poles. Only in large agglomerations (over 100,000 inhabitants), a similar difference occurred. The study results are consistent with other observations indicating the

rural environment as more traditional, cultivating the past, and with a stable family hierarchy [9, 21], where the role of the oldest generation is appreciated and respected.

Other cross-cultural studies on attitudes towards seniors also indicates that positive attitudes may be associated with a higher level of institutional care for the elderly [13, 17, 22, 23]. Not only is the standard of living of the elderly higher, which means that they are less of a burden on their loved ones or society, but also the people who take care of seniors on a daily basis are financed and better paid.

Another factor related to positive attitudes towards seniors is the level of life satisfaction of the respondents [10, 20, 21]. In studies by Łukasiewicz and Kowalski, Poles show a significantly higher level of life satisfaction than Belarusians [17]. The mentioned study also draws attention to the differences in how Poles and Belarusians relate to their grandparents. Belarusians are aware that grandparents helped their parents significantly in raising them, often perhaps even substituting for their parents. They have the impression that they like their grandparents more than their parents. This direct presence of grandparents in the lives of the youngest generation of Belarusians does not necessarily translate into the attitude of adults towards seniors, which is visible in the intensification of the attitude of social distance.

Poles more strongly emphasize good memories about their grandparents, the fact that their parents often told them that they could always count on their grandparents, and they were convinced of this. Referring to relationships with grandparents, Poles – compared to Belarusians – more strongly emphasized the time spent with grandparents and its value. They also strongly remembered their parents' appreciation for their parents and gratitude for helping them raise the youngest generation. Therefore, the connection between generations and the coherence of bonds between the youngest, middle and oldest generations, play an important role. At the same time, it should be noted that parents play an important role in shaping the image and position of an older person in the family and society [22, 24–26]. A study by Bienkowska-Ptasznik shows that Belarusians would like to learn from Poles a greater respect for tradition, for their own nation and family, which may also explain the significant difference in attitudes towards seniors [13]. At the same time, Poles more often pay attention to the negative behaviour of elderly people, causing irritability and reluctance to establish close relationships with them. This tendency – in the case of Poles – increases significantly in urban environments. The surveyed inhabitants of Polish cities perceived the difficulties associated with the functioning of older people, their boredom and helplessness in life, more strongly than Belarusians. Among Belarusians, this tendency applied primarily to people living in the countryside.

It can be said that there is a certain ambivalence in attitudes towards seniors among both national groups. On the one hand, great attention and appreciation for older people, and on the other hand, acknowledging the burden of living with older people, especially in relation to their behaviours and attitudes. The mentioned ambivalence seems to be a universal and cross-cultural phenomenon [12, 25, 26].

There is also a strong belief among the surveyed Belarusians that the older generation is more stable, living in good economic conditions, and does not want to give up its place to the younger generation, being still focused on increasing

their own resources. This is visible primarily in rural areas and smaller towns (up to 100,000 inhabitants). The attitude of social distance is significantly lower among Poles. It is interesting that this tendency concerns the rural environment in both nations. This may mean that it is more difficult for younger generations to compete with older generations and take over their roles and functions [18, 22, 27].

**Study strengths and limitations.** The strengths of the current study include a relatively large population of surveyed people, an innovative, original research tool, synthetic statistical analyses, and the short period in which the research was conducted.

On the other hand, the limitations of the research should also be pointed out. Differences in demographic characteristics between groups of Poles and Belarusians, especially in the case of place of residence, marital status and education, should be considered a limitation of the presented research.

## CONCLUSIONS

Improving the quality of life and standards of care for the elderly is conducive to shaping positive attitudes between generations. Cultural patterns, such as the image of the family and ways of communication in intergenerational relationships, are important for building the correct image of older people and their role in society. Awareness of the changes that occur in old age may be important for shaping the positive image of seniors among young generation [9, 10, 24].

The obtained results became the inspiration for continuation of the study. Similar research is being prepared on social attitudes towards seniors among Slovenians, Greeks and Ukrainians. Moreover, the relationship between these attitudes and the hierarchy of values, life satisfaction, and the level of self-esteem, will also be examined, taking into account different age groups.

To extend the study to other nationalities, the English version of the SPWS questionnaire has to be obtained, and contact made with the authors of the tool – J. Łukasiewicz and W. Kowalski [14], and take into account other variables that may modify attitudes towards older people. Many such variables may also be culturally determined and therefore have a significant relationship with different social attitudes in different countries. These may include the hierarchy of values, the level of life satisfaction, social competences, or the quality of interpersonal relationships.

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