

4-Hers learn ... we shall all be old!

J. Conrad Glass, Jr.
Curtis Trent

Society is becoming increasingly aware of the growing number of senior citizens. In observing society's attitudes, it has been well-documented that a substantial proportion of the members of society have negative attitudes toward aging and the aged. "Getting old" isn't something individuals want to happen to them. The emphasis in America is on "being young." In our societal practices and scientific literature, older people are viewed as inferior and accorded little status in today's life.

At the present time, 14% of the U.S. population, or 30 million people, are age 60 or over. By the year 2,000, it's estimated that one-third of the United State's population will be 60 years of age or older.¹ In a society in which the number and percentage of older adults is increasing, it's essential that attention be given to improving the quality of life of these people.

There's a good reason to believe that the attitudes of others are critical for the adjustment and, even the survival, of older people. Many feel the views of others affect the older adults' own self-image, feelings of adequacy and usefulness, and attitude toward life. As Rosow put it:

By now it should be clear that the crucial people in the aging problem are not the old, but the younger age groups, for it is the rest of us who determine the status and position of the older person in the social order.²

To improve the quality of life of our elder citizens, it's important that we try to change the negative attitudes of the young. The best time for beginning a program of education on aging is during the attitude-forming years of childhood. It

J. Conrad Glass, Jr.: Associate Professor, Department of Adult and Community College Education, North Carolina State University—Raleigh, and *Curtis Trent:* Professor and State Leader of Extension Training, North Carolina State University—Raleigh. Received for publication: November, 1977.

has been found that attitudes and values learned during adolescence tend to remain throughout life and strongly influence an individual's adult role. While some research reports evidence to the contrary, most studies show that adolescents have generally negative attitudes toward the elderly. In fact, some research suggests that adolescents have more negative views toward the aged than any other age group.

If these findings are true, it's important that the cycle of negative attitudes be broken. Youth-serving agencies such as 4-H can help. Before developing any programs designed to change the attitudes of youth, 4-H should determine exactly what the attitudes of 4-Hers toward older persons are. As a beginning, a random sample of 300 North Carolina 4-Hers between the ages of 13 and 18 were surveyed to find answers to two questions:

1. How positive or negative are the attitudes of 4-H adolescents toward the aged?
2. To what degree are selected personal and/or situational factors associated with adolescents' attitudes toward the aged?

Measuring Attitudes

The Kogan OP Scale³ was used to measure the adolescents' attitudes toward older people. This scale consists of 34 statements using a scale of 1 to 6, representing responses from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The average score for the sample of 4-Hers was 4.002 (see Figure 1). With a score of 3.5 considered neutral position, the sample possessed a positive attitude toward the elderly.

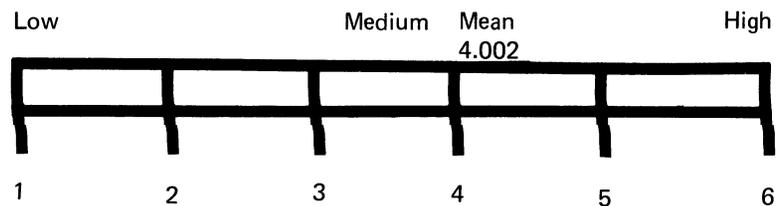


Figure 1. Attitude toward the aged mean score on Kogan OP Scale.

It should be encouraging to older adults and to those who work with them to realize that all young people don't view the elderly negatively. This finding dispels some of the false impressions of youth held by adults. It appears that the 4-H emphasis on high ideals and service to others has had some effect on its members. However, 4-H leaders shouldn't assume that no emphasis needs to be placed on improving youth's attitudes. The average attitudes of the 4-Hers in this study weren't over-

whelmingly positive. Many did have negative attitudes toward the elderly. So, some attention needs to be given to the area of improving 4-Hers' attitudes.

**PIL
Score**

On the basis of the research, the personal and situational characteristics of the 4-Hers that seemed to account for much of the variation in attitudes were "race and purpose in life (PIL)." The 4-Her's attitude toward life was measured by the Crumbaugh and Maholick PIL Test.⁴ The PIL is designed to measure the degree to which a person experiences a sense of meaning and purpose in life. White respondents held significantly more positive attitudes toward the aged than non-whites and those with higher PIL scores held more positive attitudes toward the elderly than those with lower PIL scores.

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**Other
Factors**

Age, number of brothers and/or sisters, whether grandparents live in the home, and grade in school were personal and situational factors that appeared to have no relationship to the 4-Hers' attitudes. A slight relationship between attitudes and county of residence, sex, and birth order was seen, indicating that these relationships need to be examined in greater depth in future studies. Females were more positive than males and first borns were more positive than later borns in their attitudes toward the aged.

Conclusions

The data lead one to conclude that adolescent 4-Hers who have a more positive sense of meaning and purpose in their own lives hold more positive attitudes toward the elderly. Also, the social situation encountered by non-white minority groups in American society has an impact on members' concept of self and purpose in life which might influence attitudes. One logical implication of this research is that 4-H should renew its efforts to help young people gain a positive sense of meaning and purpose in life. Both the youth and the older generation would benefit.

Summary

It's encouraging to see that the youth in this study held positive attitudes toward older persons. It isn't known if these North Carolina 4-Hers are typical of the 4-H youth of other states. Evidence about the attitudes of the rest of America's 4-Hers is still needed. Until then this study suggests that there's still work to be done in helping 4-H adolescents gain more

positive attitudes toward older people. If attitudes are learned, it's possible to design learning experiences to help 4-Hers develop better attitudes toward the elderly. Any contribution made to improve society's attitudes toward older people will benefit us all—for unless we die young, we shall all be old!

Footnotes

1. Howard Y. McClusky, "Education for Aging: The Scope of the Field and Perspectives for the Future," in *Learning for Aging*, S. Grabowski and W. D. Mason, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Adult Education Association and ERIC, 1975), pp. 325-55.
2. I. Rosow, "Old Age: One Moral Dilemma of An Affluent Society," *The Gerontologist*, II (1962), 182-91.
3. N. Kogan, "Attitudes Toward Old People: The Development of a Scale and an Examination of Correlates," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, LXII (1961), 44-54.
4. J. C. Crumbaugh, "Cross-Validation of Purpose-in-Life Test Based on Frankl's Concepts," *Journal of Individual Psychology*, XXIV (1968), 74-81.