

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GERONTOLOGICAL AGEISM WHILE TRAINING SOCIAL WORKERS

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The article shows how gerontological ageism can be prevented by embedding professional ethics in training of social workers. The ageism is often manifested through emotional alienation of young people and discriminatory practices towards the elderly. Survey data on social work students from the Yaroslavl State Medical University (YSMU) confirm the need for the training. During the survey, the KPAINS Freedom from Age questionnaire, which is a widespread gerontology tool, was used for early assessment of attitudes to aging. Young people's psychological trends have confirmed that deeper ethical study is essential for those professionals who work with older adults. Students learn to apply the basic ethical principles of autonomy, dignity and justice while exercising complex interaction with older adults through analysis of practical cases. It confirms that training competent social professionals is ethically relevant.

Keywords: professional ethics, gerontological ageism, students

Compliance with ethical standards: during the research and preparation of this paper, all necessary ethical standards and principles were observed. It ensured the scientific and moral correctness of the paper. Measures have been taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participant data. Personal information of the participants was not disclosed and was used exclusively for scientific purposes.

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РОЛЬ ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОЙ ЭТИКИ В ПРЕОДОЛЕНИИ GERONTOLOGICHESKOGO ЭЙДЖИЗМА НА ЭТАПЕ ПОДГОТОВКИ СПЕЦИАЛИСТОВ ПО СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ РАБОТЕ

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В статье обоснована роль профессиональной этики при подготовке специалистов по социальной работе в профилактике геронтологического эйджизма, который нередко проявляется в эмоциональном отчуждении молодежи и дискриминационных практиках по отношению к пожилым людям. Потребность обучения подтверждена данными опроса студентов ЯГМУ, обучающихся по направлению подготовки «Социальная работа». На этапе опроса студентов использовался распространенный в геронтологии для раннего выявления эйджистских установок опросник «Свобода от возраста «KPAINS». Выявленные психологические особенности молодежи подтвердили актуальность более глубокого изучения вопросов этики для работы с людьми старших возрастных групп. Через разбор практических ситуаций студенты учатся шире применять основные этические принципы автономии, достоинства и справедливости в сложных вопросах взаимодействия с пожилым человеком, что подтверждает актуальность подготовки компетентных специалистов социальной сферы с позиции профессиональной этики.

Ключевые слова: профессиональная этика, геронтологический эйджизм, студенты

Соблюдение этических стандартов: в ходе проведения исследования и подготовки настоящей статьи были соблюдены все необходимые этические стандарты и нормы, что обеспечило его научную и моральную корректность. Были приняты меры для обеспечения конфиденциальности и анонимности данных участников. Личная информация участников не разглашалась и использовалась исключительно в научных целях.

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The world, including Russia, experiences a rise in the elderly populations, which naturally intensifies gerontological ageism at the present stage.

Gerontological ageism is a social phenomenon manifested through negative stereotypes and discrimination toward elderly and senile individuals. State social policy prioritizes measures to reduce ageism, which are included into the Strategy of Action in the Interests of Older Citizens approved by the Government of the Russian Federation until 2030 [1].

Implementation of these measures means that professionals, and social service workers in particular, must adopt ethical

approaches to interaction with the elderly that prioritize dignity, autonomy, justice, and mercy. Previous research in gerontology and geriatrics confirms that gerontological ageism and negative stereotypes toward older adults frequently emerge among students [2–4].

Meanwhile, professional education is a critical period when motivation, needs, and personality traits of future social workers are solidified. It places increased demands on training of these professionals who should effectively shape the quality of life for older adults. This confirms that teaching professional ethics to social work students is essential to form anti-ageist ethical

Table. Student survey results

Показатель (n = 18)	Yes, I agree	More likely yes than no	More likely no than	No, I disagree
Do you feel shy while communicating with older adults?	5.3 ± 1.1	4.6 ± 1.2	51.4 ± 2.1*	38.7 ± 2.5*
Do you feel extra stress when communicating with elderly patients?	4.4 ± 1.2	3.5 ± 1.1	58.3 ± 2.1*	33.8 ± 2.4*
Do you try to maintain distance to minimize odors associated with aging?	10.3 ± 1.6	10.9 ± 1.5	31.8 ± 1.9*	47.0 ± 2.1*
Do you believe that memory loss, hearing loss, and visual impairment become more common with age?	38.8 ± 3.2	35.3 ± 3.1	17.7 ± 2.2*	8.2 ± 1.6*
Do you agree that loneliness is a common human experience that can occur at a certain age?	29.4 ± 1.5	23.1 ± 1.2	35.2 ± 1.8	12.3 ± 1.3*
Is it interesting for you to communicate with older individuals?	43.4 ± 1.9	44.3 ± 2.2	10.9 ± 1.3*	1.4 ± 1.2*
Do you like learning something new from talking with the elderly?	43.7 ± 2.1	41.3 ± 2.2	13.2 ± 1.3*	1.8 ± 1.1*

competencies and combat gerontological ageism among students [5–7].

The purpose of the study is to assess the need of students trained as future social workers in studying professional ethics to combat gerontological ageism by analyzing their psychological profile.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The psychological profile of the students was constructed based on the KPAINS Freedom from Age questionnaire. This questionnaire is used as a tool for early detection of attitudes toward ageing, which is foundational to anti-ageing management and quality-of-life improvements. [8].

The study involved 18 students (2nd and 3rd year of education) from Yaroslavl State Medical University studying Social Work, consisting of 15 females (83%) and 3 males (17%), aged 17–20.

The questionnaire allowed to identify the students' communication abilities and their readiness to communication with elderly interlocutors, assess psychological characteristics of future social workers and get an idea of the ethical foundation for youth working with the elderly and senile people. Students had to answer the following questions:

- Do you feel shy while communicating with older adults?
- Do you feel extra stress when communicating with elderly patients?
- Do you try to maintain distance to minimize odors associated with aging?
- Do you believe that memory loss, hearing loss, and visual impairment become more common with age?
- Do you agree that loneliness is a common human experience that can occur at a certain age?

The next questions were used to assess willingness of the students to work with the elderly:

- Is it interesting for you to communicate with elder individuals?
- Do you like learning something new from talking with the elderly?

The interest of students in communication with older populations has been assessed. The students were offered

to choose one of the following answers: 'yes, I agree', 'more likely yes than no', 'no, I disagree', and 'more likely no than yes'.

During the statistical analysis, the average relative values and their errors ($M \pm m$) were calculated. The differences were considered significant at $p < 0.05$.

RESEARCH RESULTS

During the research, 9.9% of social work students reported shyness when communicating with the elderly, whereas 7.9% of them indicated that their stress level was increased ($p < 0.05$).

It is noteworthy that 21.2% of students try to keep their distance when communicating with the elderly due to the fear for unpleasant smells and the associated feeling of disgust ($p < 0.05$).

The study also determined high internal motivation among students planning to work in the social sphere. Thus, most of them (87.7%) are interested in communication with older people. Therefore, they are ready to consciously transform their views and study to foster greater tolerance for the process of aging. The results of the student survey are presented in the table.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

According to the survey results, social work students often face emotional and communicative barriers that impede effective engagement with older adults. It reinforces gerontological stereotypes and serves as a foundation for ageism in professional practice.

As the students are ready to change their internal motivation, they have good empathy skills and are sincerely interested in the problems of older population. They are required to develop effective communication with older adults during the educational process based on ethical principles.

Though the problem is recognized, insufficient hours are allocated to professional ethical education of social work students, since the curricula focus on legislative and technological issues.

To improve ethical education of young people and develop healthy intergenerational relationships during the academic and industrial practice, we have proposed various formats of work such as group classes and business games to develop social skills of students that could use the student-to-student and student-to-elderly interaction model as an example. Meanwhile, interactions with the elderly are shifting from paternalism to partnership based on human rights and respect for life experience [9–11].

As ethical principles form the basis of interaction with the elderly, practical classes address tools to resolve ethical dilemmas where the interests, rights and needs of an elderly person may be ignored or violated due to age-based stereotypes. The principle of autonomy and respect for the dignity of older persons establishes that older populations maintain the fundamental right to independent choice and decision-making. The principles of mercy (benevolence) and non-maleficence (“do no harm”) ensure safety and well-being and prevent physical or psychological damage. The principle of justice demands an equal and unbiased attitude toward an elderly person, regardless of their condition and appearance. Future social workers should

apply ethical principles in situations where ageist attitudes can provoke discriminatory practices when interacting with older people. This makes it possible to identify and reduce the manifestation of ageism among young people in a timely manner.

It is relevant and appropriate to include mandatory classes on age, ageing and health in the training program of students as it allows to improve the competence of future social workers and has an anti-ageist tendency, including the Long and Active Life national project [12–16].

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the conducted research and integration of ethical principles into social work curricula confirm the relevance of teaching professional ethics to competent specialists and are the necessary conditions for the educational process to prevent and overcome gerontological ageism in the social sphere. Overcoming ageism through ethical education helps to build an inclusive society for all ages, directly affects the mental well-being of not only the elderly, but also the young, and fosters healthy intergenerational relationships.

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