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Authors / AutorInnen:

Agnes Klein; Andreas Hejj; Balázs Németh; Beatrix Lábadi;
Béla N. Horváth; Claudia Mewald; Dora Boronkai; Dóra Egervári;
Edina Haslauer; Enikő Györkő; Gábor Szécsi; Gabriella Király;
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HOW DOES HUNGARIAN MEDIA TREAT THE ELDERLY? NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF AGEISM-BASED DEVALUATION AND HOW PSYCHOLOGY COULD HELP THOSE DISCRIMINATED

Andreas Hejj

Abstract

The present paper investigates the treatment Hungarian media give to senior citizens. The findings show a strong devaluation: Older adults, a sizable proportion of Hungarian society, are of little interest to advertisers. If at all, they are mostly shown as sick, feeble members of society. It is the aim of the present study to investigate the effects of these discriminatory expectations, the dangers of a self-fulfilling prophecy and of learned helplessness, and to offer positive interventions that can facilitate an adequate inclusion of our senior citizens.

“In our encounters, age is usually one of the first characteristics we notice about other people”

(H. Prickler, 2016, 90).

1) Introduction: Seniors in Hungarian society

According to a wide-spread anecdote (Die Zeit, 2004) the Rector of the University of Königsberg greeted Immanuel Kant on his birthday addressing him „*Honorabilis Senex*” (honourable old man). Supposedly it was Kant’s 50th birthday. This gives rise to the question whether old age is really as absolute as many think.

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States of America states: “*All men are created equal*” (Declaration of Independence, 1776). For the moment let us assume without further debate that this statement could theoretically include women as well. Our present attention is dedicated to the fact, whether senior citizens in our Visegrád-group countries receive equal attention in the media, both in quantity and quality. Besides diagnosing the treatment of the elderly in

Hungarian social media, the objective of this study is to analyse the psychological mechanisms that can help contribute towards a better motivation of, and an adequate inclusion of our senior citizens.

According to the latest (2016) official data of the Hungarian Central Office of Statistics, seniors constitute a sizeable portion of Hungarian society: 2,14 million are over 60, and 1,1 million even over 70 (KSH, 2017).

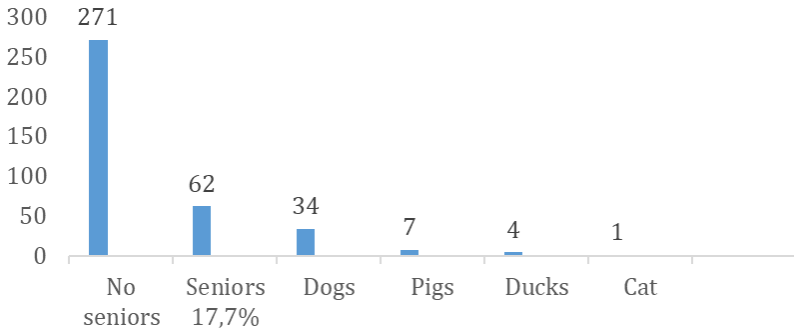
In addition to older adults' social weight, there is also a rapid increase in life expectancy of Hungarians from 69 years in 1993 to 76 years in 2015 (Worldbank, 2017).

In light of this development it is not irrelevant how media, mediating thinking in a society, treat the elderly. Do media suggest that older people have become superfluous elements of society, significantly weaker than the young, both physically and intellectually, or do they attempt to show virtues of old age to inspire seniors not to give up contact to the productive world and thus retain their independence? The more so since TV consumption of old-age Hungarians is quite extreme (Héjj, 1999) – TV is not only the prime source of news to them, it is by and large their only means of entertainment, if we take into account that an average Hungarian pensioner must survive on around 350 EUR, and only 5% get more than 600 EUR per month (Pension_Statistics, 2017).

2.1 Description of the problem: Seniors in the media

The genre most frequent on TV is advertisements. Hence the importance to investigate the image of the elderly suggested by our TV commercials. Are senior citizens considered a target-group? Do the ads present old age as a respectable, valuable life-period focusing on a self-led life and passing on accumulated experience? Or are seniors treated as „unwanted” members of society, a hindrance to development or everyday life? Are they actually so irrelevant that seniors are practically not even present in advertisements? Figure 1, based on Diagram 2 of Jászberényi (2008) shows only 62 occurrences of seniors (17,7%) in 350 examined Hungarian TV-advertisements. About as few as all the animals appearing in the same 350 ads. These findings are by no means singular: Csizmadia (2012) documents an even more alarming image: Seniors are represented in only 19 out of the 180 ads he content-analysed (=10,6%).

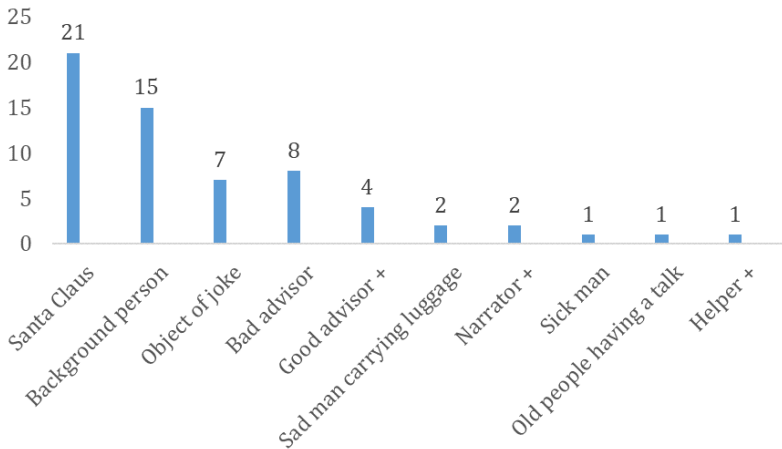
Figure 1: Occurrences of seniors in 350 TV-ads



Source: Author based on *Diagr. 2 of Jászberényi, 2008.*

But if we take the quality of the occurrences of seniors in the TV-ads into consideration, the results are even more shocking. Only 7 out of the 350 ads shows the elderly in a positive role as “good advisor”, “helper” or “narrator”. The rest shows seniors as an irrelevant background person, Santa Claus, a bad advisor, sick, or the object of a joke.

Figure 2: Contexts of the 62 occurrences of seniors in 350 TV-ads.



Source: Author based on *Diagr. 3 of Jászberényi, 2008.*

To illustrate how advertisements show the aged, let us examine three typical short spots that can be viewed on the internet under the given reference.

The first one is an ad of the Hungarian Railway to propagate pre-booking (MÁV, 2010). The spectator sees an old couple heavily panting and clumsily dragging suitcases to catch a train already leaving. The old lady scolds her husband: “Haven’t I told you to pre-book?”

Ad Nr. 2 shows an old grandmother with thick glasses who mistakes a Lenovo laptop for a backing pan (Grannyproof, 2009). She cuts onions and tomatoes, pounds meat, kneads pie on it, then she even puts the pie in the oven and turns on the heat. Afterwards she rinses the supposed baking pan in the dish-washer. And then she serves the treat for her grandson on the laptop. As he sees, what the “tray” really is, he throws away the pie and turns his laptop on in frenzy... and of course it works ... it is grannyproof.

Ad Nr. 3 demonstrates the anti-aging power of Caucasian yoghurt (Milli, 2010). We see two old village ladies having a chat over their yoghurt. An old farmer approaches riding his bicycle. One of the yoghurt-drunken old ladies whistles after the old man. He turns around and crashes into the fence. Obviously, he should have had some yoghurt too.

These are but three examples how advertisements make fun of the feebleness of the elderly suggesting that they are not full-fledged members of society. A striking linguistic parallel of this phenomenon was demonstrated by H. Prickler (2016) in the discriminating way senior citizens are addressed in comparison to active-age adults (“*wrinkly*”, “*has-been*”, “*old bag*”, “*old fart*” to name a few of her examples).

2.2 Interpretation: Prejudice, self-fulfilling prophecy and learned helplessness

Senior citizens in Hungarian society are confronted with the following – and similar – wide-spread stereotypes on a daily basis:

- *The feebleness of old age is unavoidable*
- *Being old means you are lonely, ill and no one gives a damn about you*
- *With time everyone will become dement*
- *You are far too old for this / In your age one should not...*

The problem with these “programming instructions” for the elderly is a mechanism well researched in social psychology, called *self-fulfilling prophecy*. Watzlawick (1984) demonstrates this mechanism based on his famous hammer-example.

This Austrian born communication expert worked the better part of his life in the United States, where people are “hired and fired” far more often than in our part of Central Europe. So they have to move from one city to the other every few years. Watzlawick’s hero just arrives in his new house with 135 crates of his belongings around him. He would like to feel a bit more at home, so he would like to hang his paintings on the uncomfortably bare walls. The paintings are here OK, but he has no idea in which banana-box his hammer could be. So he thinks to himself: *No problem, I’ll walk across to my neighbour and borrow his hammer*. As he starts walking disturbing thoughts cross his head. *What if my neighbour will not lend me his hammer? How unpleasant it would be, if my neighbour refused me on our first encounter! How dare he not lend me his hammer?* The longer he thinks the more he convinces himself of the supposedly antisocial behaviour of his new neighbour whom he has never met in reality. *Why will he not lend me his hammer? What a greedy idiot!* By this time, Watzlawick’s hero arrives at his neighbour’s doorstep, rings the bell, the man opens the door and our hero goes: *Keep you bloody hammer!*

The point is that negative expectations subconsciously govern both our own behaviour towards the other and their behaviour towards us. We significantly limit the freedom of our senior citizens to prove the above expectations wrong, just as the neighbour in Watzlawick’s example has no chance to prove that he is in no way greedy: Few would have the angel-like kindness to say: *“But dear neighbour, allow me to offer you my hammer on a silver plate”* after the new neighbour’s described opening.

Another severe challenge to seniors’ motivation is *learned helplessness*. Seligman (1975) uses this term to describe the long-lasting effects of an experience in which the protagonist could not avoid a very unpleasant, or could not reach a very sought after consequence. In order to fully understand what really happens, let us look at his basic experiment.

The study consists of a preliminary and a main experiment. In the preliminary part, pairs of dogs are put into a metal cage each. Both dogs learn quickly that a signal light going on will be followed by a painful electric shock. However, there is a pedal in the cage of dog Alpha, the boss, which, when pressed after the bulb goes on, prevents the shock. So

these dogs learn quickly that they can easily prevent the unpleasant consequences by watching the bulb and pressing the pedal. Dog Beta, the employee, has no pedal in his cage. There is nothing dogs Beta can do to prevent the shocks. It is important to note that no Beta dog is shocked any longer than his “boss”. As soon as the boss presses the pedal, the current is cut for both boss and employee. Though dog Beta receives no more shock than his corresponding dog Alpha, Beta learns, that there is nothing he can do to alleviate his situation.

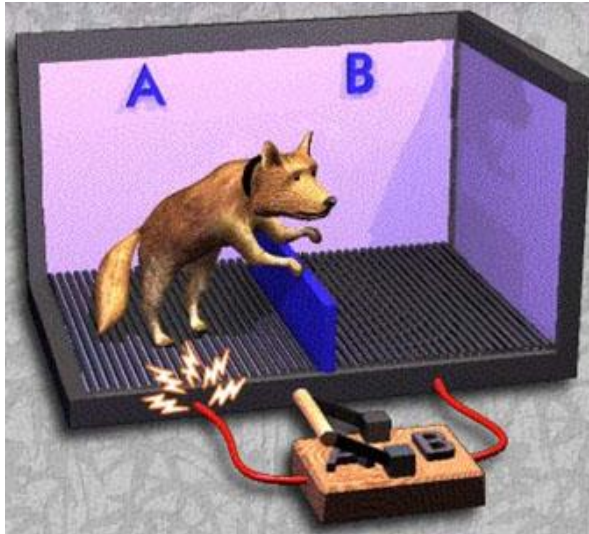
At this point the dogs enter the main experiment. Here, they are individually put into a new metal cage with no pedal but a barrier dividing the cage into two halves, A and B (see figure 3).

Let us first look at the behaviour of the “bosses” of the preliminary experiment. These dogs see the light signal and know what is coming. So they naturally look for the pedal they have become familiar with. But even though there is no pedal, these dogs have learnt to become confident that there must be *some* solution. So they quickly learn: This time it is jumping over the barrier. The dogs are standing next to the barrier. As soon as the light goes on, they leap across to the other side and can securely prevent getting shocked.

Now, by contrast, let us look at the former Beta dogs, who had learnt that there was nothing they could do. Although in the present situation escaping the shocks would be readily available, the dogs do not realize this (cognitive deficit). They do not even try to look for a solution but lay down on the metal floor under current (motivational deficit). They accept their sad fate and weep softly (emotional deficit). The singular event of the preliminary experiment caused this lasting threefold deficit in the Beta dogs.

When Seligman tried to show the deficient dogs that the situation was no longer insuperable, i.e. he pulled them toward the safe side, the dogs even exerted resistance against the helping hand. Just like depressed patients who actively refuse and fight help offered to them. It took up to 250 repetitions for the dogs with learned helplessness to eventually act like the “normal” dogs. The good news is: All learned helpless dogs could be cured. But it took a lot of effort and scores and scores of repetitions until they unlearned their acquired deficits.

Figure 3: Learned helplessness experiment with dogs as conducted by Seligman, 1975



Source: Internet free-stock.

Richter's (1957) ethically debatable rat-experiment showed even clearer physical consequences of what Seligman later termed *learned helplessness*. Richter inserted rats in basins of water from where they could not escape. A rat is a good swimmer, so they swam for up to 60 hours before they sank. When the autopsy examined their hearts, those were empty, all the blood had been pumped: The rats died of exertion. However if you get hold of a well-rested rat after only a few minutes of swimming, that rat will not enjoy being in the hands of his human captor. He will try and escape. However, when the rat sees he cannot escape your grip, he will stop kicking and will surrender to his fate. If you then insert the rat in the same basin, he will sink and drown within a few minutes. In this case the autopsy of the heart shows a completely different image: It is full of blood. The rat would have had the power to swim on for 60 hours, but he gave up in resignation. If you rescue this kind of a rat just as he starts to sink, i.e. you take him out of the water (give him new hope) and then reinsert him, he can indeed swim just as long as his normal siblings. So positive expectation (belief) can lead to survival just as learned helplessness can lead to death.

One might argue that having to swim for survival is a very unfavourable condition by itself. So let us see if we find evidence that even being provided all amenities can lead to death of resignation. Tigers do not grow in Europe or North America where they are welcome in zoos and circuses. This means they have to be transported from their Asian habitat. We can be sure that the transporters will do their very best to feed their precious freight and provide optimal temperature, space and fresh air for the simple reason that dead tigers don't sell so well. Yet every second tiger will not survive the transport (PETA, 2017). True, these tigers would not have to hunger. But they are used to eat after a successful hunt. During transport they cannot experience their own effectivity. This draws attention to the importance of experiencing one's active contribution towards achieving a goal.

Figure 4: Tigers in intercontinental transport



Source: Internet free-stock.

The above finding is especially important for senior citizens. Many consider them lucky if they get into a good home for the old-aged where they get proper attention, food and their physical and medical needs are well taken care of. Langer and Rodin (1976) demonstrated however, that more was necessary. When an old-aged home was opened they ran-

domly allocated similar age and sex inhabitants either to the experimental, or to the control floor. The rooms were identical. Inhabitants of the experimental floor could actively effect their lives in three ways. They could purchase room plants of their choice for a small amount of money. Exactly the same plants were bought for the parallel room on the control floor, the difference being, that those inhabitants were not asked what plants they liked. Senior citizens in the experimental floor could choose dinner out of three menus. Their choice also went to their parallel control fellows, without asking. And the experimental floor could agree which movie (out of three) they wanted to see on films' night. The same picture was shown to the control floor without asking them.

Only after one year of this different treatment, inhabitants of the experimental floor showed far better medical results, felt better (questionnaire) and none of them died. The control floor inhabitants were not quite so lucky, some died, most were in a weaker shape and did not feel as good as those who could actively influence their lives.

Figure 5: Old-aged home



The findings of Langer and Rodin (1976). Source: Internet free-stock.

The above examples illustrate how vital it is to avoid learned helplessness in the aged and to motivate them to as much activity as they can physically cope with.

2.3 Discussion: Preserving the health of body, soul and spirit

Who is old, *whom* we declare old, and *how* an old person lives, is only partially determined by biological processes. *When* am I old? In a disco I might be considered very old if I am over 20. In the IT industry this limit may be around 30. But a novelist is not seen as old even if he happens to be over 70. This shows that old age is to a large extent a social concept, and as such, it can be changed.

Ellen Langer (1981, 2009) demonstrated this in a very suggestive experiment. Two bus-loads of 70-80 year olds were taken to an old abbey in New Hampshire, to “the year 1959” for one week. They were asked to identify with that date. Objects surrounding them were from the middle of the 20th century: They found Life Magazine and Saturday Evening Post of the 50’s, a black-and-white TV set, an old radio with a cathode-ray tube „magic eye”. Discussions centred on the topics of the age, like launching the first US satellite, Castro seizing power in Havana, Khrushchev’s behaviour, the necessity of nuclear shelters, etc. Physical, medical and IQ tests were conducted before and after the experiment.

Participants became stronger and more flexible. They became taller, more mobile, they heard and saw better. Even their IQ increased. Their joints became more flexible, their shoulders broader, their fingers became more motile and longer (arthrosis decreased). Participants *pretended* to become as young as in 1959, but their bodies really *became* younger.

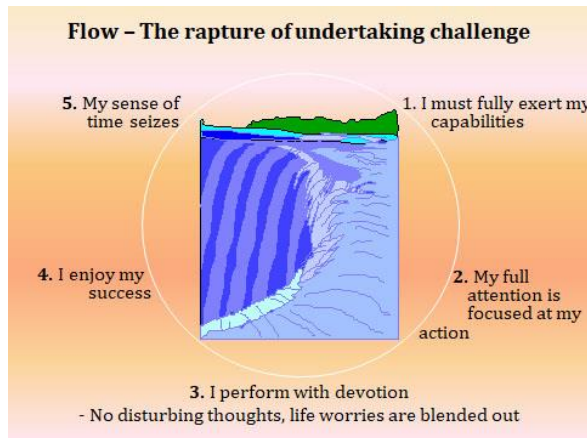
Faith can move mountains. But is *anti-aging* just a matter of faith? This seemingly new trend has emerged in the last few decades (Wikipedia_Life_extension, Héjj, 2010, 2017). Senior citizens certainly deserve a science dedicated to *adding years to their life as well as adding life to their years*. A detailed description of substitution therapy both for men and women of age in order to balance their confused hormonal harmony would go beyond the scope of this paper. But even the most basic anti-aging approaches emphasize the importance of physical activity, a light and nourishing nutrition and an active lifestyle including social contacts. Active participation in the life of the society a senior citizen lives in will allow him or her to experience respect and acknowledgement. One of the sources of adequate self-respect for senior citizens is their transcendental balance: Whatever their religion is, to know that they have done their best, and are willing to forgive both themselves and those who trespassed against them. As Seneca (0058) put it: „Happy is not the one con-

sidered so by others, but he, who lives in harmony” (Seneca, 0058), referring to harmony between actively leading one’s life and an accepting attitude.

A representative long-term study of the VW-Foundation (Lessenich, 2011) with old-age citizens proves that life satisfaction hardly depends on financial status - less than 10% of the variability of life satisfaction can be [statistically] explained by financial status. Far more important are if the person lived in a partner relationship, if they had a caring family, what their health was like, and – most important - if they are engaged in a creative activity.

Under 2.2 we demonstrated how fatally important it was to avoid learned helplessness and to immunize against it. The best way to achieve this is via encouraging a demanding activity, obviously depending on the available capabilities of the individual senior citizen. An activity, where the person must fully exert his/her abilities leads to *flow* (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), as characterized in Figure 6. Although the name chosen by Csíkszentmihályi carries meaning at all three levels of the body-soul-spirit trinity, suffice it to say that the substance in flow at the bodily level triggered by the described activities is *endorphin*. This self-produced “healthy drug” substantially increases concentration, motivation and the immune powers, all of this accompanied by a very rewarding feeling.

Figure 6: The key characteristics of Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) Flow



Source: Author’s construction based on Csíkszentmihályi (1990).

3. Conclusion: What is the secret of a happy old age?

Many 80 year olds are mentally younger than 50 year olds. Let us consider but five well-known examples of "best practice".

- Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) created his most important work, *The art of fugue*, in the very last years of his life (Wikipedia_Bach).
- Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) composed his most renowned opera, *Falstaff*, at 80 (Wikipedia_Verdi).
- Inventor Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was well into his pensioners' years when he invented the bifocal lens (Wikipedia_Franklin).
- The famous biologist, Ernst Mayr (1904-2005) published his most significant work, *What evolution is*, at the age of 97 (Wikipedia_Mayr).
- Nobel laureate chemist Linnus Pauling (1901-1994) published double the amount of scientific works between ages 70 to 90 than in the previous 20 years (Wikipedia_Pauling).

Mental fitness is certainly a key requisite to a happy old age. One is far better off with regular mental training than resting one's mental capacities. Keeping mentally fit requires learning new things. So *lifelong learning* is not just a political slogan, it can help maintain a full-fledged membership in our demanding society.

Two major supporters of mental fitness are *physical activity* and *sexuality*.

Physical activity increases brain oxygen levels by 30%, new blood vessels form in the cortex, the cerebellum and the hippocampus. The formation of new neurons and synapses is stimulated by a series of hormonal growth factors, like the Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (Wikipedia_BDNF).

During intimacy and orgasm *oxytocin* is released that strengthens the heart and stimulates circulation. It also provides biochemical protection against depression.

Prolactin, which is released after orgasm, positively affects stem-cell growth in the brain.

Physical and sexual activity are of central importance for healthy ageing!

But even more important than orgasm-centred sexuality for the old aged are body contact, tenderness and hugs that also release oxytocin with the above described beneficial effects, both for a healthy and happy old age. Hence the present author's wish to ask his favourite poet, Attila József, to conclude this study.

Figure 7: Attila József's 1928 poem Lay now your hand translated by K. Ullmann.



Layout: Author. Background photo: Internet free-stock.

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Author:

Prof. Dr. Andreas HEJJ is Head of Department for Human Resources Development, University of Pécs and professor at the University of Pécs as well as the Ludwig-Maximilians University of Munich.

Email: andreas.hejj@pte.hu

Researchfield:

how our present day behaviour, taste and preference is influenced by adaptations that used to secure the survival of thousands of generations of our ancestors adaptations in several cultures world-wide for beauty, attraction, relationship and respect for the aged.

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