



**ATTITUDES OF LITHUANIAN SERVICE PROVIDERS
IN GERONTOLOGY EDUCATION PROGRAMS:
A PRELIMINARY STUDY**

Lucinda Lee Roff

The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

David L. Klemmack

The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

Kristina Jaskyte

The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, USA

Lina Kundrotaitė

House of Generations, Kaunas, Lithuania

Brigita Kimbriene

Primary Health Care Center, Kaunas, Lithuania

Jurate Macijauskienė

Kaunas University of Medicine, Kaunas, Lithuania

Address correspondence to Lucinda Lee Roff, University of Alabama, School of Social Work, Box 870314, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487. E-mail: Lroff@sw.ua.edu

Having regained independence from Russia in 1990, Lithuania is in the process of developing a social service system to meet the needs of its older citizens. This paper describes the current situation of older persons in Lithuania and the early stages of gerontology education and gerontological service provision in that nation. Future social service providers (n = 22) who participated in one of Lithuania's first gerontological education training programs completed the 17 items of Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People Scale. Results indicate that future service providers hold generally neutral to positive attitudes toward older persons. The absence of negative attitudes toward older persons among the first generation of Lithuanian gerontological service providers bodes well for the development of gerontology education and services for older persons in Lithuania.

Gerontology is a newly emerging field in the republic of Lithuania. Governmental and non-governmental agencies are developing specialized institutional and community-based services for old people in response to a growing elderly population. As services for the aged expand, there is a corresponding need for professionally educated social service providers with specialized skills and knowledge in the field of gerontology. This paper describes one of the first efforts to develop gerontological education in Lithuania. It also provides initial data about attitudes toward older people among members of the first generation of Lithuania's gerontological social service providers.

BACKGROUND

Lithuania is a nation of approximately 3.7 million citizens and is located on the Baltic Sea. It borders Poland, Latvia, Russia, and Belarus. Lithuania's history as a state dates to the 13th century, when it ruled a landmass that far exceeded its current borders. By the late 1700s, the land that is currently Lithuania became a part of Russia, and a repressive Russian government dominated Lithuanians until World War I. From 1918 until 1940, Lithuania enjoyed a period of independence. The Soviet army invaded Lithuania in 1940 and forced the nation to join the U.S.S.R. From that point until the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russians again dominated Lithuania. In 1990, independence was restored in Lithuania, and the nation is currently in the process of moving from a command economy to a market economy with a democratic government.

LITHUANIA'S OLDER POPULATION

There are 684,284 Lithuanians age 60 and over who comprise 18.5% of the nation's population of 3,699,339 (Lithuania Department of

Statistics, 2001). Slightly over 63% (433,234) of these older persons are women. The process of transition from the Soviet economic system to the current market economy has been particularly difficult for older persons. The Soviet system guaranteed each citizen a subsistence income, employment (for those of employment age), and free health care (Bikmaniene, 1997). Persons of retirement age could count on receiving enough money through their pensions to cover basic necessities, and they could supplement retirement pensions by working. Bikmaniene (1997) notes that prior to independence it was not uncommon for older persons to help support their children, and that family members typically provided informal care to elderly relatives in poor health. Placing one's elderly relatives in a care home was considered to be a disgrace.

Major economic changes since independence, including high rates of unemployment, a banking crisis, and high rates of inflation, have eroded the economic and social position of many older persons. Pension levels are very low and now do not always cover basic living expenses (Arbaciauskiene, 1997). On average, pensions are 40% of the current average wage after taxes (Poskute, 2000). High rates of unemployment, together with obsolete skills make it difficult for older persons to earn money through work, even part time work. The poverty level among pensioners is currently 22% compared with the 16.6% level for the overall population (Lazutka, 1998). A nationwide study of needs for social services and assistance conducted by the Lithuanian Institute of Labour and Social Researches found that 88% of pensioners responding were in need of financial assistance (Bikmaniene, 1997). Since that study was conducted, opportunities to boost pension income by working have been reduced. Under a new law passed in early 2001, older persons who supplement their pensions with employment will have their pensions reduced to the minimum level (approximately \$100 per month).

Home care and other social services designed to meet the needs of elderly persons are only beginning to evolve (Barkauskas & Seskevicius, 1998). Such services are inaccessible to many, particularly the high proportion of elderly persons who reside in rural areas. Zalimiene (1997) reports that 30% of urban recipients of social services see a need for home care facilities for elderly people in their communities, and 63% of rural recipients see a similar need.

A life course view of the current generation of elderly Lithuanians provides some insight into their position in society. Lithuanians who became age 70 in the year 2000 were young children during the period of Lithuanian independence from 1918–1940. They were teenagers during World War II and its immediate aftermath and lived their adult

years until age 60 under Soviet rule. Lithuania lost one third of its population during World War II and the years immediately following (Eidukiene, 1998). Over 250,000 Lithuanians were executed or deported to Siberia, often for decades (Mullan, 1998). Survivors who returned home were often broken physically and mentally and experienced the additional horror of living in a society where the reality of their exile was officially denied. Thus, today's generation of Lithuanian elders endured severe hardships and lived under the Soviet economy and way of life throughout their adult lives. By the time of independence in 1990, today's 70-year-olds had reached retirement age. Instead of the stable retirement they expected under the familiar Communist system, with low but adequate pensions, they encountered major social change and a repudiation of the values they were taught to respect throughout their adult lives. Bikmaniene (1997) states that many in today's older generation are negatively stereotyped because they, "built a society on false principles and wrong values" and are now considered socially obsolete.

SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA

Gerontology education is in its infancy in Lithuania. While several universities offer degrees in social work and related fields (Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas University of Medicine, Klaipeda University), none offers a specialized concentration or degree in aging studies. As part of its Geriatric/Gerontology Regional Initiative, the Open Society Institute funded the Center for Professional Social Welfare Education at Vytautas Magnus University to initiate gerontological training activities and infrastructure building. Vytautas Magnus University is located in Kaunas (population 413,045), Lithuania's second largest city. An initial project in 1997–1998 focused on identifying and providing beginning gerontological training to a group of leaders and middle managers of services in the emerging continuum of care for older persons in the Kaunas area. The notion was to build a coalition of local experts, share information on gerontological needs and resources, and begin to organize local services to better meet the needs of older people. As part of this project one of this article's authors (Kundrotaitė) spent a semester in specialized gerontological study in the United States. Her studies were designed to help her return to Lithuania to complete the second stage (1998–1999) of gerontological training and infrastructure building with Open Society Institute support. A focal point for the second stage of the project was a community-wide seminar on social gerontology to be taught jointly by Lithuanian and American instructors. To determine attitudes toward

older people among initial recruits to the field of gerontology in Lithuania we administered Kogan's (1961) Attitudes Toward Old People scale to participants in the 1999 Gerontology Training Program at the Vytautas Magnus Center for Social Welfare Education.

PARTICIPANTS

Organizers of the 1999 community wide, gerontological training session at Vytautas Magnus University issued invitations to participate to a very wide range of students, health and social service providers concerned with the elderly, and others in the city and county of Kaunas. The only criterion for attendance was an interest in learning more about services for older persons. Program planners hoped that the training project would motivate a wide range of people in the community to organize and develop a continuum of services for older persons in the region. The highly diverse group of attendees included a nun with a long history of ministering to the elderly, students in the Vytautas Magnus University M.S.W. program, a psychiatrist working with dementia clients, a theological student, and an agricultural student. Attendance grew over the course of the week through word of mouth. On the initial morning 22 participants attended. By the week's end, despite extraordinarily hot weather and a poorly ventilated classroom, participation had risen to over 40.

METHOD

To assess the opinions of this initial cohort of gerontological service providers about old people, we administered the 17 "positive" items of the Kogan Attitudes Toward Old People instrument (Kogan, 1961) to the 22 people who were present at the beginning of the first session. The instrument and instructions had been translated into Lithuanian by a bilingual social worker. Respondents' ages ranged from 22–61 with a mean age of 42.3 years.

Table 1 presents the items and mean scores for the Lithuanian respondents. Response choices ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). According to Kogan (1961), high scores (strong disagreement) on these items signify negative attitudes toward older people, while low scores signify positive attitudes.

RESULTS

Examination of mean scores for the Lithuanian participants on each item indicates that Lithuanians' opinions about older persons fell in

TABLE 1 Kogan's Attitude Toward Old People Scale: Positively Worded Items

1. It would probably be better if most old people lived in residential units that also housed younger people.	2.18
2. Most old people are really no different from anybody else; they're as easy to understand as younger people.	2.67
3. Most old people are capable of new adjustments when the situation demands it.	2.27
4. Most old people would prefer to continue working just as long as they possibly can.	1.67
5. Most old people can be counted on to maintain a clean, attractive home.	1.95
6. People grow wiser with the coming of old age.	2.24
7. Old people should have more power in business and politics.	2.55
8. Most old people are very relaxing to be with.	2.45
9. One of the most interesting and entertaining qualities of most old people is their accounts of their past experiences.	1.95
10. Most old people tend to keep to themselves and only give advice when asked.	2.68
11. When you think about it, old people have the same faults as anybody else.	1.45
12. You can count on finding a nice residential neighborhood when there is a sizeable number of old people living in it.	2.48
13. It is evident that most old people are very different from one another.	2.18
14. Most old people seem to be quite clean and neat in their personal appearance.	2.14
15. Most old people are cheerful, agreeable, and good humored.	2.14
16. One seldom hears old people complaining about the behavior of the younger generation.	2.67
17. Most old people need no more love and reassurance than anyone else.	1.91

Note. All items are scored such that higher scores reflect higher levels of disagreement with the statement. High levels of disagreement reflect negative attitudes.

the neutral (greater than 2 but less than 3) or positive (1 to 2) ranges. Lithuanians gave positive mean scores to 4 of the 17 items and neutral scores to the remaining 13 items. On only 3 of the 17 items did these respondents rate older people more negatively than the midpoint (2.5) of the scale, and no item received a negative (3 or greater) score. The most "positive" opinions of older people concerned the beliefs that they have the same faults as anybody else, that they would like to work as long as they possibly can, that they need no more love and reassurance than anyone else, that they tend to maintain clean, attractive homes, and that one of their most interesting and entertaining qualities is their accounts of past experiences. Other generally positive to neutral beliefs concerned older persons' being cheerful, agreeable, and good humored; clean and neat in their appearance; different from one another, capable of adjusting to new situations; and increasingly wiser

with the coming of old age. Further, these respondents were generally neutral in their opinions about whether old people should live in residential units that also house younger people.

To the extent that opinions tended to be more negative, these concerned beliefs that older people don't keep to themselves and only give advice when asked, that they complain about the behavior of the younger generation, and that they should not have more power in business and politics.

DISCUSSION

The finding that these Lithuanians held generally favorable attitudes toward the elderly reflects a number of aspects of contemporary Lithuanian culture. Lithuanians maintain very close family and intergenerational ties that for many include continuing identification with their family's village of origin. It is common for urban youngsters to spend summers with their grandparents who remain in rural areas. The respect typically accorded the old in agricultural societies tends to prevail in these rural areas. Similarly, Lithuanians maintain a strong attachment to the memory of deceased elders. Memorial services for the deceased at one month, one year, and longer intervals from the date of death are important parts of the culture. Family members tend cemetery plots frequently, with flower gardens at the gravesite being a common feature. The persistence to these traditional customs is consistent with positive opinions toward older people. Further, the close intergenerational ties are reflected in beliefs that older people are like any one else, and that that they are generally interesting and relaxing to be with.

The finding that Lithuanians tend to find older persons somewhat difficult to understand may reflect the vastly different life course experiences of the 70+ generation and those in young and middle adulthood. Today's old have memories of war, privation, and repression that are hard for young and middle aged persons to understand. Younger people have more resources and opportunities to adapt to the rapid social change that has occurred since independence. These findings suggest that respondents did not see a particular advantage in having the older generation gain more political or economic power in the current fluid social situation.

The strongly "positive" finding that most old people would prefer to continue working as long as they possibly can is consistent with the reality of Lithuania's economy. These respondents' opinions reflected their knowledge that many old people cannot subsist on their government pensions alone and maintain paid employment to prevent

destitution or dependence on younger family members who are in difficult financial circumstances themselves.

The overall finding that these Lithuanians held generally positive to neutral attitudes toward old people bodes well for the future of gerontological education and service provision in Lithuania. The favorable attitudes toward old people found in this preliminary study suggest that these potential human service workers will develop services from the perspective of respect and goodwill toward the potential client group.

Lithuanian society faces many challenges in responding to its comparatively large and growing elderly population. As communities develop creative ways to improve the quality of life for their older citizens, they will increasingly look to individuals with knowledge and expertise in the field of aging. The nation's educational institutions will, in turn, need to train professionals and others about older people and ways to meet their needs. This preliminary study suggests that individuals inclined to work with older persons see them in a generally positive and respectful light. If the people who attended these pioneering gerontological training sessions in Lithuania are representative of others who will follow them, gerontological education in Lithuania is off to a good beginning.

Unlike in the U.S., where attempting to reverse negative attitudes and stereotypes of the elderly is often a necessary first step in gerontology education, persons who teach the first cohorts of Lithuanian gerontological service providers may be in a position to focus from the outset on the substantive issues of improving the quality of life in old age.

REFERENCES

- Arbaciauskiene, N. (1997, September) *Elderly of Lithuania*. Paper presented at the International Federation of Aging Global Conference, Durban, South Africa.
- Barkauskas, V. H., & Seskevicius, A. (1998). Development of home health care in Lithuania: Current status and key development issues. *Home Health Care Management & Practice*, Aspen Publishers.
- Bikmaniene, R. (1997, p.4). *Problems of the development of social care for the elderly*. Vilnius: Institute of Labour and Social Researches, unpublished manuscript.
- Eidukiene, V. (1998). Overview of demographic situation. In U.N. in Lithuania (Ed.), *Lithuanian Human Development Report, 1998*. Vilnius: United Nations Development Programme.
- Kogan, N. (1961). Attitudes toward old people: The development of a scale and an examination of correlates. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62, 44-54.
- Lazutka, R. (1998). The standard of living and poverty. In U.N. in Lithuania (Ed.), *Lithuanian Human Development Report: 1998*. Vilnius: United Nations Development Programme.

- Lithuanian Department of Statistics. (2001). Statistics: Population by sex and age on 1st January [On-line]. Available: www.std.lt/STATISTIKA/Gyventojai/lytis_amzius_e.htm
- Mullan, B. (1998). *Voices of pain*. Vilnius: Aidai.
- Poskute, V. (2000). *Social security. Lithuanian Human Development Report: 2000*. Vilnius: United Nations Development Programme.
- Zalimiene, L. (1997). *Need for social work in Lithuania*. Vilnius: Institute of Labour and Social Researches.

Copyright of Educational Gerontology is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.