

## Jing Wu

Institute of Social Work  
Estonian-Swedish Mental Health and Suicidology Institute  
Tallinn University

*jing.wu@suicidology.ee*

## SOCIETY'S ATTITUDES AFFECT SUICIDES AMONG OLD PEOPLE IN EUROPE

### Introduction

Older adults are not only faced with numerous physical, psychological and social role changes that challenge their sense of self and capacity to live happily and also are inundated by our youth-oriented culture with ageism (Sneed & Whitbourne, 2005). Ageism is the term coined by Robert Butler (Butler, 1987) to designate "a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old." Older persons today are treated as second-class citizens and non-contributing burdens on society (Branco & Williamson, 1982; Nelson, 2005).

In most countries of the world, compared to other age groups, older adults kill themselves at higher rates (Conwell, 2009) with evident planning and strong intent to die (Demirçin *et al.*, 2011). Within Europe elderly suicide rates show a northeastern gradient (Voracek & Marusic, 2008): the highest rates were in Eastern Europe and the lowest rates were in Southern Europe (De Leo *et al.*, 2009). Suicide cannot be viewed and known in isolation from the context of society. Therefore, there is a pressing need to obtain deeper understanding of how society's attitudes toward the elderly affect suicides in this age group in Europe.

### Methods and results

Data of elderly suicide rates in 28 European countries were obtained from the World Health Organization (WHO) European Mortality Database. Data of society's attitudes toward elderly were collected from the European Social Survey (ESS). Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient was calculated to analyze correlations between attitudes towards ageism and suicide rates. The level of statistical significance was set  $p = 0.05$ .

1. How important for you to be seen as being unprejudiced against people of other age groups? (*Spearman's corr.*  $-0.50$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ); 2. How do most people view the status of 70+? (*Spearman's corr.*  $-0.45$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ); 3. How likely it is that most people view those 70+ as friendly? (*Spearman's corr.*  $-0.48$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ); 4. How likely it is that most people view those 70+ with admiration? (*Spearman's corr.*  $-0.63$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ); 5. How likely it is that most people view 70+ as having high moral standards? (*Spearman's corr.*  $-0.46$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The scale of the first question is "00=not at all important; 10=extremely important" and the scale of second question is "00=extremely low status; 10=extremely high status"; the scales of the rest of three questions are 5 points, namely, "0=not at all likely to be viewed that way; 4=very likely to be viewed that way".

### Discussion

Society's attitudes of friendliness, admiration towards elderly and perception of elderly having high moral standards have inverse relationships with elderly suicide. These outcomes are in line with some previous researches that emotional aspects play a particularly important role in determining the risk for elderly suicide behavior (Conwell *et al.*, 2002; Turvey *et al.*, 2002; Yur'yev *et al.*, 2010), in which circumstance many elderly people feel lonely and isolated so that their self-esteem suffers (Devons, 1996; Yip *et al.*, 2003; Yur'yev *et al.*, 2010). Ageism impacts negatively on elderly people, not merely through inequitable treatment by society, but through self-fulfilling prophecy. Ageism can develop into a form of "self-ageism", that is, negative perceptions about people of one's own age (Bodner, 2009; Bodner & Cohen-Fridel, 2010) and self-ageism is more dominant among older individuals who suffer from insecure attachment and who report a lower quality of life (Bodner &

Cohen-Fridel, 2010). Secure attachment in late life seems to be related to less ageism and a better quality of life. The enhancement of a secure attachment base in elderly people may assist in moderating ageism and improving older people's quality of life (Bodner & Cohen-Fridel, 2010), which are rooted in the concepts of "life satisfaction" and "well-being" (Bodner & Cohen-Fridel, 2010; Lawton, 1991).

Moreover, the results of the study reveal that reviewing elderly as having higher social status and the perception of importance of anti-ageism are negatively correlated with elderly suicide. These positive attitudes might be considered protective factors that support elderly people and reduce suicide mortality among this age group.

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