

## THE POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF OLD AGE AS REFLECTED IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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**ABSTRACT** The present paper examines the political construction of ageing and conflicts between generations. The process of construction is driven not merely by institutional actors and opinion leaders in the media, but also by citizens who talk to each other about politics. In my paper I have focused on the latter by observing online discussions that appear on the political forum Index.hu. Disagreement between old people' and 'young people' evolved mainly about the pension system, thus the examination of ageing constructions is embedded in this context. In spite of its numerous limits, the method used seems to be suitable for providing hypotheses for further research. In the first part of the study I present the applied theoretical approach in which the concept of stereotype is connected with the concept of social construction. After that I focus on investigating the activity, origin and contents of the stereotypes that influence the construction of ageing. In the third part of the study the components of the constructions are demonstrated.

**KEYWORDS:** Intergenerational conflict, online discourse, social construction, stereotype, pension system, ageing; youth.

### INTRODUCTION

There are many common presuppositions regarding elderly people's political behavior, and empirical findings show that there are important differences between generations in relation to their political participation, attitudes, values and trust (see: Róbert – Valuch, 2013). From a constructivist viewpoint these differences are socially constructed and the underlying reasons for them and their different manifestations can be empirically investigated. Examining

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online discussions can be a useful starting point for further quantitative and qualitative research. While observing these discussions one finds many conflicts between generations, each of which may plausibly serve as the basis for formulating assumptions about the political construction of the elderly. In the constructivist approach, these social constructions emerge through the interactions between members of society and its online forms – which are free of spatial and temporal constraints – becoming more and more significant. This study examines generational constructions in online discussions on Index.hu, the largest Hungarian political forum. The research is exploratory in nature and is designed to offer some preliminary findings for subsequent research. The first part of the paper traces the applied conceptual framework and the methods used. Findings are then presented about generational constructions.

## **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND STEREOTYPES**

The premise of my approach is that social groups are social constructions that are created and become integral parts of social reality through interactions between members of society (Berger –Luckmann, 1966). Applying this constructivist approach has proved especially fruitful in research areas which focus on social groups and their behavioral patterns and role perceptions. This is particularly important when group formation has a biological origin, thus there is a risk of false, biological explanations for characteristics ascribed to groups. The constructivist approach has been useful in gender studies and ethnic research for criticizing biological explanations and offering alternative reasoning. By examining the historical formation of the meaning of infancy, Philippe Ariés shows the relevance of this approach in relation to age (Ariés, 1962). Pierre Bourdieu argued in a similar manner when he contended that ‘youth is just a word’ (Bourdieu, 1993). The ‘Elderly’ as a social group also has a biological origin, but even the boundaries of this group are socially constructed as well as most characteristics ascribed to it. Constructions are formed through interactions and people do not enter the discussion without presuppositions: they may have prior stereotypes about social groups and their political behavior. These become apparent during their interactions and become integral components of the construction process. This is, of course, not a one-way process. Preexisting social constructions may also influence stereotypes. In this study stereotypes are individual impressions about specific social groups which are affected by social influences, individual cognitive processes and personal experiences. Social construction is the social version of stereotyping. Here, individual impressions are organized in

a more robust fashion, thus increasingly becoming a part of social reality. Both autostereotypes (stereotypes about in-groups) and heterostereotypes (stereotypes about out-groups) are important in the process of construction. This sharp distinction between stereotypes and social constructions is only analytical in nature because there is strong two-way relationship between the individual and the collective level.

Connecting the concept of stereotypes to construction research can supplement the theoretical approach with empirical findings. Social psychological research has paid great attention to stereotypes throughout the last 50 years, with numerous studies being published about the evolution, stabilization and dynamics of perceptions relating to social groups. These findings may help to interpret and explain the observations of this paper.

## METHODS

The spread of online discussions offers new – and as of yet largely unexplored – areas for observation in the realm of social sciences. They allow the observation of interactions among numerous participants. In addition, research shows that participants are more prone to express sincere opinions during online discussions than during offline discussions (Rains, 2005; Bargh, McKenna, Fitzsimmons, 2002; Min, 2007). The lack of a social presence may shield the participant from the risk associated with deliverance and may also provide the safety and convenience of a private environment – where participants dwell during a discussion – thus alleviating inhibitions which otherwise might impede their public expression (Stromer-Galley, 2003). Thanks to anonymity, participants in online discussions can express opinions that they may suppress in offline public discussions even though these affect their behavior. Moreover, in the online space some types of interactions are likelier to occur than in an offline context. Thanks to the features of this online, anonymous, textual and simultaneously public and private space there are ample opportunities for young and old people to interact with each other and debate issues such as pensions, attitudes towards the state, etc. without having to engage in the often restrictive taboos associated with these topics. However, this assertion should encourage the researcher to be careful. One cannot assume that communications observed online reflect the actual discourse of everyday offline life.

These discussions refer to this special context where people act under the cover of anonymity. Several tools are available for users to communicate with friends, acquaintance or strangers (Herring, 2001). In this study conversations

that take place on the ‘leading and largest’ online forum of Hungary<sup>2</sup> were observed. The main specificity of forums as a communication tool is that they enable anonymous, asynchronous conversations about issue-centric topics. Vast numbers of topics are available for debate and discussion about a wide range of issues, but as this study examines political constructions, observations were confined to topics of a political nature<sup>3</sup>.

The aim was to identify as many conversations as possible where participants’ old age came up as an issue of discussion. The first step was to look for users who were identified as being old. Then, I went through their comment history to identify threads that were relevant to the subject under investigation. Randomly-chosen pages about randomly-chosen topics were scanned using keywords<sup>4</sup> to find these users. The forum makes it possible to see only the selected user’s comments on a particular topic. From among these comments, those where the user’s age was mentioned were selected. If I found such a comment I examined the complete flow of discussion around it. Almost all the ‘old’ users examined paid special attention to a particular topic that had a provocative title, calling for ‘Radical pension cuts!’<sup>5</sup>. This topic, launched in 2005, was one of the most active ones in the entire forum with more than 228 thousand comments which indicates the importance of this subject among forum users. As almost all the ‘old people’ examined were most active concerning this particular topic their comments were not filtered with keywords; instead, all of them were analyzed with the constraint that the program only showed the individual user’s last 1000 comments in their comment history. Observed conversations took place between December 2011 and September 2012<sup>6</sup>. Discussions about the actual political context rarely emerged during conversations but they were rather dominated by general discussions about pension cuts and the relationship between young people and old people.

This method has both limitations and benefits. The participants’ socio-demographic backgrounds are barely known and the ability to generalize findings is also restricted. At the same time, conversations that are observed

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2 Website’s self-published statement

3 <http://forum.index.hu/Topic/showTopicList?t=9111313>

4 Used keywords were Hungarian synonyms of words such as ‘old’, ‘retired’, ‘age old’, ‘grandchildren’. In Hungarian these include *idős*, *vén*, *öreg*, *nyugdíj*, *nyugdíjas*, *nyugger*, *éves*, *unoka*.

5 <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9131523&la=122449129>

6 Those comments which have an earlier date were derived from other topics of discussion. In these cases I indicate which topic the given comments come from.

without intervention may reveal characteristics and conflicts which other methods would not capture.

Throughout the research five 'old' users' comment histories and the comment threads related to them were examined in detail. The comment flows include several 'old' and 'young' users' comments in addition to the five users. The five users were between 60 and 70 years old (it is difficult to obtain data about people over 70 years old using this method). Regarding political attitudes and place of residence the picture is varied. One of the five users was a woman.

## **THE POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE ELDERLY**

In this section I show how stereotypes are activated in online discussions, which factors are important in the emergence of these stereotypes and content of social constructions and how stereotypes between generations turn into a coherent system and construction.

### **The elderly as a social group**

As I mentioned before, 'old' people paid special attention to the topic entitled 'Radical pension cuts!' In other threads where these 'old' people expressed their opinions about political issues there was hardly any talk about their age. This statement holds true even when participants were aware that the people they were debating belonged to different cohorts. On the contrary, about the topic of 'Radical pension cuts!' numerous grievances, views, attitudes and beliefs emerged about other generations which were not connected to pension-related matters.

It is especially important to trace with which situations groups of people who share a common feature are considered a social group by others. Our observations show that, in 'young' people's eyes, pension-related issues have the effect of turning 'old' people into a unified social group. In the cases of other political issues 'elderly' is not a distinct social group: other affiliations such as political identification, ethnic background or gender override the impact of age. Thus the only politically relevant generational issue was the pension system contained on the political forum of Index.hu.

Why is it especially important that the pension debate makes distinct groups of 'old' and 'young people? Research shows that stereotypes about given groups are activated when a competitive environment or an interdependence

linkage between two social groups evolves (Brewer, 1996). The pension issue involves a struggle according to disputants' interpretations: a competition takes place between generations for available material resources. Higher pensions go hand in hand with greater burdens on active cohorts, which is why they advocate for cuts in pensions. 'Old' people, meanwhile, are on the other side of the argument, wanting at least to maintain the status quo.

For this topic the categories of 'old' and 'young' become more clearly defined and collectively-assigned boundaries are largely accepted by participants. The issue of retirement pension entitlements constructs these boundaries: 'old' is defined as someone who receives a pension and 'young' is defined as someone who does not. The assignation of boundaries is important because it constructs the groups per se, irrespective of how simplistic and homogenizing these categories may be. Therefore all active participants were categorized as 'young' while retired participants were categorized as 'old' in these discussions. Both 'young' and 'old' people self-identified themselves in these two categories: they used these labels for self-identification and in relation to each other as well. Although workforce status in reality determines the boundaries of groups, the labels are based on age. Henceforth I use the categories of 'young' and 'old' in this sense.

The discussions show that the pension debate activates stereotypes on both sides of the age barrier and involves participants hurling insults at each other which are unconnected to the issue of pension reform.

Another interpretation is possible about why the pension debate activates existing age stereotypes. Research shows that one's emotional condition affects the extent to which one relies on stereotypes when passing judgments (Bodehausen, 2001). People are more likely to pay attention to individual pieces of information and base their judgments on these items in emotional situations with moderate excitement levels. In contrast to this, in an emotional situation with either low or high excitement levels people prefer more simplistic, homogenous explanations and tend to rely on stereotypes. In connection with the pension issue, young people have a dark picture about their recent and (particularly) potential future situation, when, in their own words they believe that they will not receive a state pension.

*"I just expect that somebody who could retire on better terms than I will (if I will) shouldn't start mocking me when I'm working hard from morning to evening" (Venorutti, 2012-02-11)*

*"You've just left a piece of shit for us and even now you are stealing from us..." (Gabika, 2012-06-26)*

The participants imagined a dark future which may have triggered their anger or distress. This emotional response makes them more liable to rely on their stereotypes in related debates instead of choosing more systematic arguments and undertaking more considered information-processing.

In sum, it seems that it is not an accident that even in debates over pensions inter-generational grievances that reach beyond pension questions emerged which were not visible in other topics where people from different cohorts were engaged in debate.

## The origin of generational stereotypes

Until now I have discussed how generational stereotypes are activated. In this section I examine from where these stereotypes stem and how they are maintained.

In pension debates everyday frictions experienced in public spaces between young and old people often emerge. Young people often criticized old people for being aggressive in public spaces and always commuting during peak hours, thus making ordinary people's everyday routines more difficult.

*"It is always most urgent for pensioners. I haven't gone to a pharmacy for years because [last time] hordes of pensioners squashed me with my hundred kilos like mammoths do with small trees when window number 2 opened. If I called their attention to this, I was the jerk. But it was wondrous how they tossed away their sticks and started galloping towards the new window. Then it took forty minutes for each of them to get all their free medicines from the pharmacy. They are free, of course, it is from my NI<sup>7</sup> cash. I just needed a damn painkiller. Waiting for the bus wasn't any better when I still used public transport. Whenever the bus appeared around the corner they [the pensioners] immediately scattered, body checking anyone in a way that would have caused even Wayne Gretzky to fall over." (Martin Screamer, 2012-03-14)*

*"I've no idea how many there are but I'm sure that most of them are on tram 1 at 8 am. Because pensioners aren't banned from morning peak hours. (If they paid the full fare I wouldn't care; they could travel whenever they wanted to)" (Gabiiviii, 2012-08-12)*

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7 National Insurance

At this point it is worth referring to the work of Richard Sennett who focused on the gradual emptying of the public sphere and the decline of social relations in the *Fall of Public Man* (1977). His argumentation about the historical change of public spaces is especially interesting. According to Sennett, every wave of urban architectural change successively subordinated public spaces to foster continuous motion and transportation, whereas previously they also facilitated the creation of relationships. This latter function of public spaces is disappearing to the extent to which they are exclusively subsumed by the need to facilitate movement, and in proportion to which the right of unrestricted movement has become an absolute right of individuals. Young people felt that they were being hindered in this absolute right when old people were allowed the same right. These impressions may be decisive in judgment-formation about old people as a social group, especially when such encounters are almost the only direct examples of relations between the groups. It can be assumed that intergenerational contact is rare beyond family ties. However, in family ties the older parents or grandparents appear with their whole personality and not as representatives of a social group.

Besides the sociological aspects it is worth taking into account social psychological aspects as well. For stereotypes to emerge it is important that they feed off some knowledge about the social group in question. Stereotypes evolve from this information. After they are created they filter further impressions and can resist counter-experiences. This information does not have to come from direct experience, but direct experience conveys important information about a given group.

The frictions that occur during everyday interaction may be sources of substantial information, influencing relations between generations. This is firstly because individuals perceive these frictions as strong stimuli and therefore they may be more memorable than other aspects of their interactions (Campbell, 1967). Secondly, negative stimuli are stronger than positive ones (Soroka – McAdams, 2015). Furthermore, minority groups and groups that individuals perceive to have markedly different characteristics from their own are more likely to become associated with negative attributes (Linville et al, 1996). Consequently, a pushy old man stands out more than a pushy youth or a non-pushy old man. When the stereotype of “pushy elderly people” is invoked, the bias tends to be strong since people perceive phenomena in a manner that fits their own stereotypes. Mass media may play on such stereotypes: old people are often portrayed as pushy, rude and aggressive in films, thus contributing to the emergence and reinforcement of this stereotype.

This indicates that it does not really matter if old people are actually pushier than others, or if they are overrepresented in the morning commuter rush.

Stereotypes emerge irrespective of the truth. It is noteworthy that everyday friction that arises in public spaces with the elderly may not be the strongest source of stereotypes regarding this group. However, as this aspect came up quite often in the thread, its relevance can reasonably be assumed. Furthermore, the observed content originates here.

## The content of stereotypes

Until now I have traced the activation and emergence of stereotypes. I will continue by addressing the content of stereotypes and how they are organized around a single belief system. It is a legitimate question to ask what the connection is between the discussed forms of stereotypes that emerge and politics. The answer is the concept of perceived covariation, which means that people often infer the existence and nature of features and attitudes about which they have no knowledge from assumed correlated traits (Linville, 2001). People infer other people's attributes based on their visible behavior. This phenomenon is even more common at the group level. Pushy behavior can be connected with the notion of the unlimited pursuit of self-interest. The "only-me" attitude associated with pushy behavior was clearly demonstrated in discussion.

During the debate the notion of the unlimited pursuit of self-interest, selfishness and envy appeared in almost all negative generalizations towards the elderly. These (assumed) motives coalesce stereotypes into a coherent belief system. Interestingly, these motives are present in old people's perceptions of youths as well.

*"You are the one who cannot comprehend this, you have been socialized for selfishness by the regime, you people only pursue your own self-interest. The only thing that you keep parroting is that since back then you were better off, that should be some sort of standard of measurement. You don't know any lenia<sup>8</sup> beyond yourself. Social, economic, long-time interests – these do not exist for you. You are the focus of everything: you think that anything that is good for you, is good – and what is really strange is that after that you keep accusing others of being selfish."* (advocatusdiaboli, 2012-09-04)

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<sup>8</sup> A word of Latin origin, rarely used in Hungarian. In this context it means a kind of standard or reference point.

*“those who demand pension cuts all the while foaming at the mouth are the ones that are living in the luxury afforded them by tax fraud, parading around in mercs<sup>9</sup> exploiting the loopholes of lame legislation” (joy, 2011-12-25)*

It is not unique that two social groups ascribe the same motives to each other. The outgroup is usually perceived as being more homogenous and negative than the ingroup. The same attribute that one perceives as being clearly negative in the case of “others” can appear in a more nuanced light when applied to “us” (Campbell, 2001).

## **INTEREST-DRIVEN GENERATIONS – MOTIVES ASCRIBED TO YOUNG AND OLD PEOPLE**

Above I trace a model of how self-interest pursuing stereotypes about old and young people may emerge and become activated based on online discussions. These stereotypes are increasingly becoming the grounds of the social construction processes during interactions. Next I will show what kinds of tangible behavioral motives are ascribed to each other by the groups in this interest-driven frame.

### **Victimization and vilification**

The framing of the conflict during the discussions can be appropriately depicted using melodramatic terms. Based on this there are frames of victimization, vilification and heroization (Andits, 2012). During victimization the group presents itself as an innocent victim of negative processes. Next, the causes of these negative processes are identified and demonized during the vilification processes. In discussions about pensions these frames are clearly identifiable. Young people considered the high state burden the main reason for their hopeless situation. At the same time, they deemed retired people to be the main beneficiaries of these burdens. This is the starting point of the process of constructing old people as the enemy. This construction process extends to elderly people’s values, morality, and judgment. In this situation old people are painted as defenders of the status quo. In turn, the elderly did not challenge the notion of the futureless situation of young people but instead rejected the assertion that they are the causes of this situation, shifting the

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<sup>9</sup> A reference to Mercedes-Benz cars.

responsibility back onto the young people and their powerlessness, laziness, and egoism.

In this ‘struggle’ there are victims, and groups identify enemies as the causes of their problems, but there is no hero. The hero who in this case could be a political actor, or even the state, is absent from the discourse. In the majority of similar societal conflicts there is usually a hero; a political entrepreneur who presents the conflict in the political arena. However, in this case there is no one that is referred to by young participants as someone able to solve this negative situation, who is capable of overcoming the “enemy”.

### **State and activity**

This raises the question of the role of the state. During the debate the state appeared as a third ‘actor’ in the conflict but not as a ‘hero’. The two groups perceived the state from different viewpoints and the different perspectives gave it distinct roles in the conflict.

Elderly people shifted the responsibility for the hard situation onto both young people and the state. While young people emphasized the dependent status of retired people, old people held their pensioner status to be in the form of an entitlement. They considered that they were receiving pensions as a right based on a legal contract with the state, not as the result of young people’s kindness. Therefore they did not have to be thankful to young people: even the responsibility for setting pension rates belongs to the state and not to this segment of older people. Thus they rejected the notion of the existence of dependent relations between old and young people by saying that only “old people – state” and “young people – state” relations exist: consequently, only the state could be responsible for everything.

*“This was already discussed a couple of times here as well. I’m in a pension relation only with the state. I’ve already done what I was obliged to do and now state is fulfilling its obligations. Your relation with Uncle State is a different subject, but that is your business.” (dos48, 2012-02-11)*

In the eyes of young people the state is not an independent entity but has been captured and manipulated by old people. They did not accept the idea of ‘state as scapegoat’; old people remain the enemy. They thought that old people used the state as a vehicle for defending their own interests, thus making youths powerless against old people. According to this perspective the state has been captured by old people’s interests. This idea was expressed

in terms such as “pensioneristan”<sup>10</sup>

*“It cannot handle this, because ALL parties must move in on retired people, in this respect there is a SINGLE-PARTY SYSTEM...” (deleted nick, 2012-06-27).*

The idea of limiting the voting rights of retired people emerged several times during the discussion. The reason behind this is that old people are not able to change their deeply-rooted opinions even when confronted with factual information. Thus they are unable to comprehend even basic economic processes.

*“But they are citizens with voting rights...You can't say that is okay, they aren't capable of dealing with the realities of life anymore, and that's that. If they weren't able to face reality then how can they vote? What is the basis of their opinion? Take nagyapapa<sup>11</sup> here – all he wants to do is triple the average salary – and he thinks that I am living in a dream world. Really? (Nórianyu, 2011-12-20)*

The rigidity of old people's thinking and their deeply-rooted attitudes that make them so resistant to the notion of change and economic realities emerged many times during the debate. Indeed, this was not denied even by old people themselves; however, they perceive the issue from a different perspective. According to young people, old people's thinking should be driven by facts, but old people think that a fast-changing world's rapidly-changing facts do not justify changing well-proven attitudes. Especially since these attitudes and opinions have always served them as useful compasses during the ever-changing contexts of their lives.

*“It is true that my values are very simple, but life has justified them in my eyes, and it would be really strange if at 64 years old I varied them monthly.” (mamicska, 2009-04-18)<sup>12</sup>*

*“With lifelong experience under my belt why wouldn't I give a shit about a context in which people who are working according*

10 Originally ‘nyuggerisztán’. The first part of the word ‘nyugger’ is a sobriquet of retired people. The second part of the word (‘istan’) refers to a country. So the whole word means, mockingly ‘retired people's country’. However, given that the existing countries that take “-istan” as part of their name are generally less developed than Hungary, this word may also suggest a kind of backwardness.

11 A user's nickname; it primarily means ‘grandfather’.

12 From a topic called ‘Fiala János, the public service presenter’ <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9080998>

*to a changed world's changed working conditions want to step on my head in my last years?" (dos48, 2012-02-11)*

Another argument for constraining retired people's voting rights is that their interests are in insuperable contrast with the longtime economic interests of the country.

*"I don't question that others aren't smarter either – unfortunately – but it is an important factor that the active, child-raising, tax-paying, learning-working citizens' personal interests largely overlap with the actual, longtime social-economic interests of the country" (advocatusdiaboli, 2012-09-05)*

At the same time, old people reproached young people due to their modest political participation. Whereas young people considered the state to be captured by old people, the elderly argued that this perception may only be the consequence of the fact that younger people aren't able to effectively stand-up for their own interests in politics. Both interpretations are embedded into the same "pursuit of self-interest" frame. According to young people, old people are participating in politics only on behalf of their own special interests. However, old people conceived that young people aren't interested in public affairs because of their laziness and hedonistic lifestyles and they only deal with their particular well-being instead of formulating a larger plan, and clearly standing-up for their common interests.

*"Retired people are able to stand up in a unified way, are able to defend their own interests. Moreover, if you remember January when people demonstrated for Orban<sup>13</sup> there were predominantly retired people among the crowd. You are (today 25-45 years old), however, you are unable not only to organize yourself but even to clearly define what you would like! (...) All age-groups have to undertake their own tasks; our fathers had shed their blood to be better, we also did our best when it was necessary. Is this all you are capable of? (...) You are all losers, buddy! (nagyapapa, 2012-07-06)*

*"Then don't clamber around on the forum here, but go to the government office. Or don't you have enough blood for that?" (skarabeus01, 2012-07-10)*

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13 Referring to the first 'Peace March' which was a protest against the international critiques of Hungarian PM, Viktor Orban.

## Past and present

There is sharp contrast between the groups in relation to how they judge the past. Young people conceived of the Kádár-period<sup>14</sup>, when current retired people were active, as the era of welfare. At the same time they blamed the relative wellbeing meted out to today's retired (once-active people) for their present problems, and on the mentality of old people. Old people, of course, rejected this standpoint and conceived of these "welfare years" in a more nuanced way. They supplemented this picture with the shortage of freedom and opportunities they experienced, as well as the poverty of the preceding years of "goulash communism".

*"Moreover, from April to October of 1957 I used to go barefoot (the only "clothes" I had were 1 pair of black, "satin" trousers..!) It is not proper to brood about the recent big "poverty" from "Royces and Mercs"<sup>15</sup>!.../when you don't even know what it is" (skarabeus01, 2012-06-20)*

*"Can a young man chose an appropriate career that suits his talent or not? Can he exploit these opportunities or not? If I view today's situation from this perspective, then it is much more favorable and exploitable than the past" (vinkel2, 2012-06-26)*

During the discussion complain-bidding (a sort of race to the bottom) commenced between generations regarding in which period it was worse to be young, and in this bidding-war values such as welfare and freedom were compared.

*"The current retired generation had grown up in that regime and if you deem a shortage of democracy and freedom as the price of our relative well-being, well, you could also say that one doesn't miss something that one doesn't know even exists." (dos48, 2012-02-29)*

Young people's notion of "goulash communism" was only positive regarding its material conditions, but they considered the resulting well-being and its beneficiaries (old people existing today) to be the main fountain of

14 János Kádár was the last leader of the communist regime and remained in his position for more than 30 years. This period is often called the time of "goulash communism" or "the most cheerful barrack" because of Hungary's relatively high level of well-being within the Socialist block.

15 Automobile brands: Rolls-Royce and Mercedes-Benz

present difficulties.

*“There were about 15-18 years of Kadar socialism (from the first third of the ‘70s till its end) which you seem to have been socialized into perfectly, and you enjoyed being in it (many people did) – but which was necessarily doomed to failure and which secured this virtual (and very virtual) work-freedom and relative wellbeing you keep mentioning with such future-depletion effects that this country will suffer even for decades (...) even your grandchildren will pay the price for your relative enjoyment of two short decades... While it was not so good even for you...” (advocatusdiaboli, 2012-09-14)*

For this legacy young people hold today’s retired people to be collectively responsible. They feel that current retired people have not left anything valuable behind, but they expect a lot from their youngsters. The old people’s evaluation, of course, stands in contrast with this narrative: they perceived that young people were eating-up their legacy.

*“The thing is, dear dosfater<sup>16</sup>, that the dipshit, lazy-bum “kádárikuszes”<sup>17</sup> seem to be winning now. Because the wheels of history turned this way and everything.” (deleted nick, 2012-03-11)*

*“Your generation hasn’t left us too many legacies beyond tons of failure...” (Boróka Mihály, 2012-02-21)*

*“You shouldn’t tell me anything!! You’ve inherited goulash communism, a most cheerful barracks and a best student from us and what did you do with it in a mere 20 years???” (macskatarka, 2012-09-04)*

According to young people, the legacy of the Kádár-period is not only the meager financial status of the country. They attributed major importance to the “kádárikusz instinct” which they think is strongly present in old people’s behavioral patterns. They considered the aforementioned pursuit of self-interest to be a result of socialization of the Kádár-era.

*“I think members of Dos’s<sup>18</sup> generation lived the most part of their lives in a system where they had absolutely no say. These*

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16 A nickname of a user.

17 ‘kádárikuszes’ is a sobriquet of old people. The ‘-icus’ termination refers to the latin names of species of human. This name mockingly suggests that the generation that grew up under the Kádár-regime is a distinct human species.

18 A nickname of a user.

*sort of c'est la vie and take-as-much-as-you-can mentalities used to be awesome because no one knew what would happen tomorrow. Well, they brought this mentality to democracy and don't realize that politics seek to curry to them. If they don't get something this is not because this is decided up there, but because they couldn't really afford to give it to them. I agree with those opinions which argue that socialism hurt most in the head. We can see this every day in this forum's kádárikusz." (Boróka Mihály, 2012-09-02)*

*"Two generations of pampered kádárikusz can't be changed" (veritas\_2, 2012-09-19)*

The young people reckon that today's old people are the beneficiaries of history who obtained much more advantage than both previous and following generations. In contrast with previous generations they could live out their active years in welfare and peace and their retired lives are also comfortable, unlike those of following generations. A major debate has also emerged around how today's old people took care of pensioners during their active lives. According to young people, this was done at a very basic level, with old people of that time living in poverty. Today's old people reject this assessment and think that they did more for old people than modern young people do for the elderly.

*"I've lost count of the number of times that we already wrote this down: we provide you with at least one and a half or even two times the level of wellbeing that you provided for your grandparents. We do that. But what you want is threefold of that... In other words, they didn't support sick people, and most of their old people were left in poverty...their own payments were used to increase their own living standards and they call these years 'contributions'. Namely, because a part of their money was run through an equalizing system which ignored the really needy, the really powerless and those that couldn't help themselves..." (advocatusdiaboli, 2012-06-27)*

*"The pension of my father-of-law was 2800 Ft when my monthly salary was 3300 forint – what are you huffing about??" (skarabeus01, 2012-06-27)*

The judgment of history was one of the most important aspects of the debate. The strongest emotions appeared in relation to this factor as the life and work of a whole generation is bought into question by the succeeding generation. According to this historical approach old people seem to be extraordinarily

lucky, always prosperous, a lazy and selfish generation with both their active and retired lives resulting in the elimination of the next generation's living conditions. Old people rejected this interpretation as a whole.

*“...I reject this on behalf of myself and all other pensioners. You are exaggerating, again. Parents basically want to give more to their children than they used to have and would like their children to achieve more than they did. (...) Please do not present old people as a mean and selfish group because they are not.” (Tetrahidrotiofén, 2012-09-05)*

This debate about history clearly shows that there is not only an age-group conflict between young and old people. The confronting age-groups perceive how different their fate, history and opportunities were, even though they do not agree in the assessment of these things. They see each other not only as a group with conflicting interests over material resources, but as a very different generation. In this sense this is rather a cohort-generational conflict than an aging conflict (see Szabó – Kiss, 2013).

## **Young and old people – in the eyes of old people**

Although old people's image of youths has already been discussed in brief, it is worth examining it in more detail. It may be seen that this construction fits into the frame of the pursuit of self-interest as well. According to old people, young people subordinate everything to their pleasures; they only take care of themselves. The political inference of this construction is the aforementioned political apathy which is a good signifier of their laziness.

Given the topic of the subject this construction emerged mainly in relation to having children and jobs. According to old people, they are not responsible for the hopeless situation of young people and the unsustainable pension system, but active people are. As old people said, they are not able to secure the conditions of a sustainable pension system. This is due to the low level of reproduction and employment as an individual feature and not the consequence of circumstances. Young people, of course, blamed circumstances for these difficulties.

*“Because parents are unable to support their children, because their expenses are higher due to pensions. Normal, sentient human beings don't give birth in such uncertain circumstances like rats do with dozens of descendants. With recent developments not only 2.5 but not even 1 child can be*

*taken care of with certainty.” (Vulpes Macrotis, 2011-12-22)*

*“You have just framed the thinking of selfish, lazy people”  
(Anyugdijas, 2011-12-22)*

According to old people the low willingness to have children can be traced back to the demand for leisurely lifestyles and low responsibility-taking attitudes of young people.

*“More of us were raising children when it was really hard – 2-3 children without this beefing and disgusting whimpering. Of course, we did not do it from besides a computer. If you are not able to do it then you are nothing in my eyes. Pass.”  
(mamicska, 2011-12-20)*

*“This is not because there are no children. But it is better to party until 30 for girls. After that it is hard to make 2-3 babies! Respect for the exceptions :)” (deleted nick, 2012-06-20)*

*“You are so egotistical that you don’t even want to transmit your genes.../ Not that humanity is suffering a big loss from this...” (skarabeus01, 2012-07-11)*

The family seemed to play more of an important role for old people in their comments. Old participants highlighted their families and grandchildren more often, and several times they broke off the discussion, referring to them. They hereby conveyed the fact that they are primarily grandparents and parents. Consequently, family status seems to play an important role in their self-construction and it is this that they consider to be missing from young people.

*“The old woman had much better things to do than be here among tons of idiots – she celebrated Santa Claus with her grandchildren :) then she watched her scholar son on TV and now she is incredibly happy :)” (mamicska, 2006-12-03)<sup>19</sup>*

Old people’s views about young people’s attitudes towards work also fit into this construction. In this interpretation young people rather blame circumstances than work harder by sacrificing their own comforts. Interestingly, young people interpreted old people’s active years in a similar way when they talked about socialist working attitudes.

*“Pensioners need two things. Enough children and enough jobs. Neither of them are given, because Europe/Hungary is impotent. Again: WHILE you don’t make enough children who*

<sup>19</sup> From a topic called “Does somebody like gypsies (2)”. <http://forum.index.hu/Article/showArticle?t=9005529>

*will work...so you understand, help: you mean reproduction, a job: you don't have to import Chinese mobile phones, socks and Volvo busses because...well let's start working at last....."*  
(Anyugdijas, 2011-12-21)

In relation to work, old people often accused young people of a low willingness to pay taxes. All of this leads me to conclude that there is a remarkable overlap between young peoples' and old people-constructions of each other, even though there are many differences in their appearances. They view each other as generations whose members are lazy, selfish, always taking care of themselves and placing their own comfort in front of the common interest, while both generations conceive their own situation as a consequence of circumstances, not the result of individual weaknesses.

*"You can't comprehend that it is not retired people who are the burden on this country, but the sluggardly, helpless active strata who, instead of creating values, is only looking for scapegoats"* (krampács, 2011-12-28).

*"But probably there is no sense expecting anything from people who live in the shadow of death and whose main activity is to save money for their own funeral. There is only one goal: living the rest of their lives as conveniently as possible"* (Nórainu, 2012-06-27)

But how do old people experience being old? Young people often explain old people's behavior by pointing to the frustration and inability that exists in their last years of life. In contrast, old participants spoke very positively about being old. They didn't deny the indictments of young people: they admitted that they would like to spend their last years in comfort. However, they hold that this claim was morally justified, unlike young people.

*"...and thank God my identity, my soul and my well-being is okay, I have never been more satisfied and of a lighter consciousness – I can thank being old for this."* (mamicska, 2012-05-24)

*"You are afraid until you are responsible for somebody. Among other reasons that's why I love being old :)") (all successors and predecessors stand on their own feet.)"* (mamicska, 2009-12-29)

## CONCLUSIONS

As was stated at the beginning of the study, the goal of writing the paper was to offer some preliminary findings for subsequent research. The applied method does not allow the assertion of precise answers about the political construction of ageing and the nature of conflicts between generations but it facilitates the formulation of relevant research questions. In closing it is worth translating the findings of the study into concrete research questions which can foster subsequent investigations.

The most important theoretical question is if there is any sense thinking about social constructions at an individual, stereotype-level as well. Can cognitive approaches to stereotype research take us closer to understanding social constructions? Is there any relevance in the frictions of everyday interactive situations in emerging impressions about old people? As for the content of social constructions, we can pose the following questions: Is it true that the pension problem is the most important generation-based political conflict? Does the pension-question overlap with other tensions between generations? Do generations construct each other in the frame of the pursuit of self-interest? Is it true that young people conceive that the state is captured by retired people's interests? Understanding the differences between generations using a historical perspective may raise important questions which could be useful for identifying concrete generations. Subsequent research may address these questions.

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