

Social work students' perceptions of ageing

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Authors	Ridgway, Victoria
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Social Work Students' Perceptions of Ageing

Little is understood about social work students or social workers' perceptions of ageing in the UK. This paper presents a small-scale study of 20 master social work students' perceptions of ageing during the first year of their programme. A mixed method approach was employed over a two-staged research project, in both stages the social work students were asked to complete Kogan's (1961) Attitudes Towards Older People Scale (KATOPS) and draw a person aged 75. Results demonstrated that most students had neutral to positive attitudes towards older people at the beginning of the programme and these improved in stage two; all had positive attitudes. The drawings provided a visual narrative of their perceptions of older people, visual signifiers included physical signs of ageing. Fulfilment, emotion, family, individuality and appearance were emergent themes. Whilst the programme enhanced the students' perceptions more work is needed to dispel the myths and stereotypes about ageing.

Key Words; ageing, drawings, Kogan, older people, perceptions, social work students

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Background

This paper discusses the findings of a mixed method research project that explored social work student's perceptions of ageing and older people. Social workers are in a unique position to influence future social and economic practice surrounding care of older people (Milne et al. 2014) and a call for a reinvigoration of gerontological social work has been made. Social work capability statements for social work with older people (British Association of Social Workers England (BASW) 2017) have set out the knowledge, skills, values and approaches required to meet the complex and diverse needs of older people, noting a talented committed workforce in this field is needed. This has implications for social work, it has been suggested gerontology social work has become marginalised (Milne et al.

2014) and education has a limited focus on ageing (Richards et al. 2013). Social workers do not select this field as a career choice and many view this area as unrewarding, depressing, demanding and uninteresting (CPA 2009; Ray and Phillips 2012; Webb et al. 2016). The publication of these capability statements provides a framework for social work education, highlights the importance of this field, will enhance and be crucial in social workers understanding of ageing and in meeting the needs of older people. This research project was conducted before the publication and therefore has tangible consequences for the implementation for the social work profession.

Introduction

The UK has an ageing population, 18% currently are aged above 65 (ONS 2017), by 2040 1 in 7 people will be aged over 75 (Government Office for Science 2016). Older people account for approximately 60% of local authority spending on social services (DH 2010), this will increase as the population ages. Much is written about ageism towards older people and the impact of this on them personally, culturally and structurally. Age is used as a demarcation on a person's ability and position in society. The term ageism emerged from Butler's seminal work that older black people were discriminated against because of their age, he defined ageism as a 'systematic stereotyping of discrimination against people because they are old' (Butler 1989, 139), noting they were considered senile, old fashioned, rigid in thought and manner and that younger people saw themselves as fundamentally different. Ageism has been developed and redefined by several authors and is about discrimination, attitudes and behaviours towards older people, stereotyping, oppression, stigma, prejudice and age categorisation (Butler 1989; Bytheway 1995; Calasanti 2005; Centre for Policy on Ageing (CPA) 2009; Palmore 1990). Age discrimination and inequalities exist and worsen during the life course, it has been suggested that structural age discrimination occurs in health and social care provision (CPA 2009; Milne et al. 2014). Age discrimination was established

in 61% of older peoples' daily lives (Age UK 2017). Health and social care reports reveal poor standards of care and negative attitudes of staff (Care Quality Commission 2017; Francis 2013; Oliver et al. 2014), discrimination towards older person in service provision is evident in the expenditure per head on older people (Personal Social Services Research Unit PSSRU 2016).

Social workers are required to acknowledge the heterogeneity of older people, not to view them from a negative or ageist perspective and ensure their practice is anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive (Ray and Phillips 2012). The United Nations Principles for Older Persons (1991), statement 18 clearly articulates that '*Older persons should be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and be valued independently of their economic contribution*'. Social worker values of social justice suggest that the profession is in an ideal position to challenge persistent age discrimination in health and social care services, however their own personal and professional perceptions of ageing need to be examined. There is a rarity of research that explores social workers' attitudes towards older people, in particular within the UK. Kane (2006) found that graduate social work students held a more positive view of ageing than undergraduates, two American studies of graduate social work students Golden et al. (2014) and Olson (2007) also established higher positive attitudes about ageing and older people. However, a Turkish study of undergraduate social work using Kogan's (1961) Attitudes Towards Older People Scale (KATOPS) established they had mostly positive attitudes towards older people (Duyan et al. 2016). McCleary (2014) using the same tool found exposure to older adult films improved social work students' positive attitudes. Whereas Heycox and Hughes (2006) established final year social work students' attitudes were more neutral, with positive scores related to older people being classed as 'younger old rather than 'old old' and wise. The use of basic and condensing language (Kane 2006) and a 44% occurrence of infantilisation with older adults

feeling they had been treated like children (Age UK 2011) are other examples. Factors that contribute to positive or negative attitudes towards older people in nurses and American social work students include participants age, gender, educational qualifications, contact with older people and professional education (Boswell 2012; Deltsidou et al. 2010; Gellis et al. 2003; Lee 2009; Lin and Bryant 2009; McCleary 2014; Ridgway 2015; Ryan et al. 2007; Webb et al. 2016). However, there is limited known research on these factors for UK social workers.

Qualified social workers have often seen practice with older people as ‘routine and uninteresting’, preferring to work with children and families, and have used terms such as ‘dependency and frailty’ whilst paying little attention to the strengths, resilience and coping abilities of older people (Ray and Philips 2012). The specialism is viewed as a second-class career (Deltsidou et al. 2010) and research has ascertained that social workers do not wish to pursue a career in gerontology (Olson 2007). This was also confirmed in a cross-continent study of social work students where only 5% indicated interest in the field (Chonody and Wang 2014). Kydd et al. (2013) established that 81% of health care professionals (including social care staff) did not value older peoples care as a highly skilled area. However positive perceptions of working with older people have emerged and included learning from them understanding their life stories and reciprocity, that social work students themselves will fall into the range of older people one day (Webb et al. 2016). The capabilities statement for social workers stresses the importance of social work with older people and that social workers need to be attracted to work in this area, particularly those in qualifying and ASYE years (BASW 2017). Milne et al. (2014) and BASW (2017) advocate for a gerontological social worker. This can be fundamentally difficult for social workers as practice is based along an age continuum where social workers’ caseload also includes younger adults and

families, this makes awareness and anti-ageism practice more challenging. Capabilities statement for social workers in England who work with older people (BASW 2017) highlight social workers need to recognise the increasing complexity of the older population and that they can lead and challenge practice across an integrated health and social care system. This has implications for education to promote positive perceptions about later life, it has been documented that older people want social workers to be role models who champion and make positive changes in services for older people (BASW 2017) and social work education needs lecturers to demonstrate expertise and knowledge in gerontology (Webb et al. 2016).

The social construction of ageing embodies stereotypical images of older people (curly hair, asexual, disabled, dependent) which in turn promotes discrimination, these have become a social discourse, whereby positive and negative stereotypes of older people have been established (Bytheway and Johnson 1998). Negative attributes include being grumpy, impaired (physically and mentally), isolated, ill, useless and in poverty. Positive attributes include being grandparents, kind, dependable, happy, freedom, and eternal youth (Barrett and Pai, 2008; Blaine, 2013; Palmore 1990). By the nature of their role and tasks, social workers need to reframe some perspectives through which older people have been socially constructed and stereotyped and need to take a wider perspective to understand the diversity of ageing in terms of gender, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity and to view experiences in later life in a more positive light. A few studies have explored students (nursing and gerontology) perceptions of ageing through visual methods. Common visual signifiers drawn included mobility aids and/or physical decline (Barrett and Cantwell 2007; Lichtenstein et al. 2005; Ridgway 2015; Roberts et al. 2003), signs of ageing (grey hair and/or wrinkles) (Lichtenstein et al. 2005; Ridgway 2015), clothing and appearance (Ridgway 2015), activity (including hobbies and physical exercise) (Lichtenstein et al. 2005; Ridgway 2015) and grandparents

(Ridgway 2015). To date there are no known studies that have used visual methods in social work to explore perceptions of ageing.

Little UK research in social work has explored perceptions of ageing and older people and suggests greater understanding is needed. The capability statements are emergent and will take time to embed into social work practice therefore it was timely to explore social work students' perceptions of ageing and older people.

Methodological and Ethical considerations

This study embraced social constructivism and visual discourse analysis as a philosophy, to understand how social work students' social and cultural assumptions construct meaning and language about age and how these processes influence their own perceptions of older people. A pragmatic multi-level mixed method study was employed, a questionnaire which incorporated KATOPS and the use of visual methods. The sample were asked to draw a person aged 75 and provide a brief explanation of the image to aid analysis and avoid potential bias. The age 75 was chosen to reflect the 'third age' defined as a period of physical and mental wellbeing (Higgs and Gilleard 2015). Data was collected simultaneously once at the beginning of the first year and once towards the end of that year.

KATOPS has been used with a wide range of individuals including college students (Kogan 1961), social workers (Duyan et al. 2016; McCleary 2014) nurses and health care professionals (Adibelli and Kiliç, 2013; Iecovich and Avivi, 2017; Lee 2009; Lin and Bryant, 2009; Ryan et al. 2007; Turan et al. 2016; Zampieron et al. 2012; Zhang et al. 2016). Some criticism of the tools validity is centred around the outdated Americanised language and poor correlations. However, the scale is widely used and is recognised internationally (Yun-e et al. 2013) and

reliability confirmed (Doherty et al. 2011; Iecovich and Avivi, 2017; Zverev, 2013).

It is a 34-point scale with opposing positive and negative statements about later life, for example “*most old people make one feel ill at ease*” and “*most old people are very relaxing to be with*”. An overall score is accumulated from the responses to the question ranging from 34-238 with 136 being neutral, a score above was positive, below negative.

Drawings are said to facilitate an exploration of an individual’s social world and it has been suggested that drawings can identify stereotypical opinions and perceptions that words cannot convey (Rose 2016). Thus, participant produced drawings provide a discourse of symbolic meaning where visual signifiers indicate perceptions. Drawings have been used in several studies to explore perceptions of ageing; student nurses (Ridgway, 2015), college students (Lichtenstein et al. 2005), gerontology students (Barrett and Pai 2008).

Ethical approval was gained from the Faculty Ethics Committee. The ESRC (2017) ethical framework was considered and attention was given to power, coercion, identification of inappropriate attitudes and poor practice. Ownership of the image and copyright were also important ethical issues. Power and coercion concerned the relationship between the researchers (both lecturers on the programme) and the students, it was made clear the students were under no obligation to participate, there would be no academic benefit bestowed to participants and they were able to withdraw without any consequences.

Copyright focused on the ownership of the image (that it belongs to the participant), therefore consent focused on permission to reproduce the image for dissemination and how the image would be shared (Rose 2016). Care was taken not to belittle or show the image in a negative manner (Wiles et al. 2011), however participants were informed that if necessary inappropriate attitudes and behaviours would be escalated.

Research aim was to;

Explore social work students' perceptions of ageing and older people. Three research questions arose;

1. What are the existing perceptions of ageing and older people in a group of social work students at the beginning of their programme?
2. How did these perceptions evolve during the first year of the programme?
3. Has exposure to social work values influenced views and opinions of the student group?

A purposive sample of 20 Social Work Masters Students from one cohort were asked to participate. They were emailed prior to data collection with a consent form and participant information sheet, all consented, and data was collected whilst they attended lectures, stage one at the beginning of their programme and stage two at the end of the first year following a placement. On both occasions they completed the same tool, the simultaneous data collection facilitated comparisons between the drawing and overall KATOPS score. The sample included 16 females and 4 males, of these 55% were aged 22-29, 45% above 30, 75% were white British, 15% were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups and 10% were Irish.

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for the questionnaire; internal reliability was measured by Cronbach Alpha Test. Kogan (1961) advocated that both Pearson's and Spearman *Rho* correlations should be used. An independent T test was used to compare KOAPS to demographic variables (Koskinen et al. 2016). The principles of discourse analysis were used for the drawings where the cultural significance of the images was interpreted, visual signifiers were examined to draw out meaning and provide accounts of the social world (Rose, 2016). Rose's (2016) work on three stage analysis was employed, drawings were sorted into broad categories, written narratives were then constructed, and final themes were organised, KATOPS scores were compared to the thematic analysis. Drawings were rated positive, negative or neutral adapted from work by Lichtenstein et al.

(2005) and Roberts et al. (2003) who both rated the visual meaning of the constructed image. Positive included independence, symbols of happiness, activity, relationships with others and social interaction; neutral were limited information, stereotypical clothing, generalisations of being older, neutral expressions; negative included sadness, physical aids and physical signifiers of age.

Results

All 20 students completed the initial questionnaire (stage 1), the KATOPS range of scores was 134 (just below neutral indicating a slightly negative attitude) to 191 (an extremely positive attitude), the mean was 164.70 SD 14.8. Thirteen students completed stage two (one questionnaire was incomplete and therefore discounted), the KATOPS range was 140-195, all students scored above neutral, the mean had increased 166.08, SD 18.2. Half the group had no prior social care work experience and only three had worked with older people. However, 70% had contact with older people ranging from daily to more infrequent contact (once every few months) and included family members, neighbours and through work.

Independent T test measured the effects of social work students' characteristics and their KATOPS (Table 1). Age difference was noted, younger participants started with the lowest KATOPS mean. Age group 22-29 mean did not improve at stage two whereas all other age groups did. Females scored higher means than males, however both genders improved.

Social work students were asked to indicate their anticipated working environment as a qualified social worker, 35% selected children and young family settings, 35% mental health

or learning disability settings, 10% older people and 5% criminal justice, 15% were undecided.

There was a disappointing lack of correlations between Kogan's paired questions; this was mainly due to the small number in the study. Four paired questions had significant correlations (Table 2). Cronbach Alpha was found to be reliable and had Cronbach α scores of $\approx .76$. This is comparable to previous research (Doherty et al. 2011; Ryan et al. 2007).

In total there were 32 drawings of a person aged 75, three participants in stage two chose not to draw, however they completed the questionnaire and gained positive KATOPS scores.

There were 17 positively rated images (stage one 11, stage two 6), one negative image (stage two) and 14 neutral images (stage one 9, stage two 5). Drawings rated positively tended to have higher KATOPS scores, mean stage one 165.18 and stage two 178.17. The mean for the negative image in stage two was 145.00, neutral in stage one was 164.11 and stage two 157.50. The images formed six themes; fulfilment, emotion, family, individuality and ageing, and appearance. Visual signifiers were noted and included hairstyle (male facial and ear hair, curly hair), clothing, physical ageing (glasses, wrinkles and one walking stick) and religious symbols.

Fulfilment was indicated in both stages of the study via the drawing and the free text comments made, older people were referred to as being wise or content, one image (Figure 1) was markedly different, interestingly this scored below the neutral point of the KATOPS.

Emotion was depicted in most images, 23 were depicted smiling, for example one image was noted to be smiling and waiting for her friends to go out. Other images depicted happiness via the portrayal of positive symbols (flowers) or words such as cheerful or happy, or noted the

person depicted was nice. A more neutral or sad expression was noted in five images, these were rated neutral or negative, of these four were males and were drawn by the younger males in the sample.

There were four images that depicted family members (grandmothers and a parent), these were rated positively, and participants had positive KATOPS scores suggesting positive role models supported a positive attitude. Care was taken in the construction of the image (Figure 2) and they were noted to be a real representation for example 'inspired by grandma' or 'this is my grandma' and 'reminds me a bit of my dad'.

Individuality and ageing appeared in both stages of the study, all participants scored positive KATOPS. The drawings were a mix of positive and neutral ratings, there were two distinct sub themes evident, 75 not being old and older people being no different. Not being old referred to the expansion of middle age (the third age), for example, a participant stated, '*I tried to make my man look like he wasn't elderly because I don't think 75 is elderly*'. Older people being no different was evident in five drawings. There was a juxtaposition between the comments made, participants acknowledged individuality but also drew on stereotypes of ageing, for example '*old people are no different from anyone else yet they have ageing skin*' others stated, '*in my opinion older people are no different from others they have the same needs etc and should be treated the same*'. Some images were 'stick people' and included a faceless person, there appeared to be a lack of respect for older people by the limited detail. However, it could also be suggested that participants did not want to stereotype as they described the images as '*a person*, or that '*older people are the same as anyone else* or '*elderly are no different than anyone else, Sean Connery doesn't look 80+*'. The participant in this case drew on popular figures within society to emphasise individuality, this indicated how social and media forces can influence individual perceptions.

A common perception about appearance of older people emerged and more images were rated neutral. Iconic imagery and visual signifiers were used to convey meaning. Many women were depicted with curly hair, glasses and wearing skirts, two images had religious symbols depicted (a necklace). Men were drawn in smart clothes, typically a suit/shirt and tie, from this a uniform of later life emerged for both genders (Figure 3). Participants referred to stereotypical perceptions of older females, for example ‘*stereotypical image of an older lady (perm, glasses, dress, slippers)*’ and reference was made to shorter hairstyles. Male ageing was illustrated by hair loss, wrinkles, ear and facial hair (a moustache or beard was common), a participant stated, ‘*just has wrinkles but same drawing as non-older person apart from wrinkles, shorter too*’. Female ageing was less evident, one image had wrinkles and one had a mobility aid.

Activity was indicated in four images, all had positive KATOPS and drawing ratings, one participant wrote “*this is a lady who was on TV and exercised daily, had a toy boy! good on her*” (Figure 4). Visual signifiers and words (breasts, clothing, hairstyle, sexuality) of femininity were used. Other images focused on exercise such as ‘Zumba’ and the need to maintain fitness and social interaction with friends. Interestingly all these images were produced by older female participants suggesting that age and gender impacted and influenced opinion.

Discussion

This is the first known study to explore social work students’ perceptions of ageing using the KATOPS and drawings. The two-staged approach allowed the observation of how perceptions changed during the first year of the programme. It was established that the

KATOPS mean score improved and all participants gained a positive score at the end of the study, this supports previous non-UK research (Duyan et al. 2016; McCleary 2014). The results also supported previous research on nurses and American social work students that demographic variables affected participants KATOPS score. Participants age influenced overall KATOPS, those aged 22-29 scores did not significantly change in comparison to those aged above 30. This is comparable to a UK study of undergraduate nurses, where the age group 22-29 overall scores did not improve (Ridgway, 2015). Gender like previous research confirmed males had lower KATOPS means (Lee 2009; Ridgway 2015).

Anticipated career choice confirmed what is already known, that social workers do not value the specialism (Chonody and Wang 2014; Deltsidou et al. 2010; Olson 2007; Ray and Phillips 2012). These findings suggest that educational interventions are required to challenge perceptions for males, those aged 22-29 and the profession in practice and education need to promote gerontological social work.

The drawings provided a visual narrative of social work students perceptions of older people, which were drawn from societal constructs and misconceptions about age alongside realistic interpretations. The images failed to reflect the diversity of later life however this was only a small sample. There were changes in the ratings (positive, negative and neutral) between the research stages, this could indicate that visual perceptions worsened or were not challenged sufficiently in the social work programme, however these findings correlate to previous non-social work research (Lichtenstein et al. 2005). Visual signifiers were explored to examine the meaning and participants accounts of their social world. Subtle messages of ageing were inherent, work in the field suggests that these are common associations with old age (Ridgway 2015) however this is the first known time this has been established with social work students. The most common visual signifiers included religious symbols such as a cross shaped necklace, noted by (Ridgway 2015), positive symbols (smiling, flowers) (Ridgway

2015, Roberts et al. 2003), male facial hair (Lichtenstein et al. 2005; Ridgway 2015), female hairstyle (Ridgway 2015), clothing older people wear (Ridgway 2015) and glasses (Barrett and Cantwell 2007; Lichtenstein et al. 2005; Ridgway 2015; Roberts et al. 2003). These visual signifiers were used to categorise the person drawn as old and were a label to demark age, these can be classed as representational flows, whereby a standard identity in later life has been culturally and socially constructed and depicted.

The concept of fulfilment aligned to the principle of Blaine's (2013) and Palmore's (1990) positive stereotype, where the perfect grandparent is noted to be wise or wisdom was an attribute of later life. Heycox and Hughes (2006) observed wisdom being an attribute that provided positive perceptions however previous research has not identified fulfilment.

Several participants depicted family members, reflecting previous research (Lichtenstein et al. 2005; Ridgway 2015; Roberts et al. 2003). These findings suggest that understanding individual older people does have a positive impact on perceptions (Webb et al. 2016).

Participants portrayed emotion and happiness within the drawings, 72% of the images were smiling. This was noted in the content analysis of Lichtenstein et al. (2005) and Barrett and Pai (2008) research who established 45% and 60% were smiling respectively. The positive portrayal of emotion promotes a better understanding, suggesting participants did not draw on stereotypical views of older people such as being grouchy and miserable (Palmore 1990).

In comparison to other visual studies (Barrett and Cantwell 2007; Lichtenstein et al. 2005; Ridgway 2015) a more favourable understanding of physical disability emerged. Only one image depicted disability via the portrayal of a walking stick suggesting that the participants in this study did not view disability as a consequence of later life. Factors that contributed to this could be lack of exposure to ill older adults, (within nursing contact with dependant older adults negates a positive attitude) and content of the programme.

The portrayal of the women within the study formed two prominent themes some were depicted as ‘frumpy’, in a uniform of later life (Ridgway 2015), had an icon hairstyle (Ridgway 2015) and one image was drawn with wrinkles, whilst femininity was referred to by clothing, hair style and body shape in other images. Lichtenstein et al. (2005) found 61% of their images depicted wrinkles, whereas Barrett and Cantwell (2007) identified 41% depicted wrinkles. For males traditional clothing (shirt and tie) was used and more were depicted with wrinkles. What is apparent from this research is that less participants used wrinkles as a visual signifier of old age and is the first known time this has been established in a social work context.

This emphasis of 75 not being old referred directly to the third age, where Kruse and Schmitt (2006) suggest that older people are open to new experiences and have capacity to engage.

This notion of not being old challenges the stereotype of later life being a declining period of health and a move to dependency. These findings align to Sudbury’s (2004) work, that old people felt they were younger than their chronological age thus avoided being categorized as old. Participants could have reflected this social and cultural phenomenon where people want to distance themselves from the perception of what old is. This aligns directly to key definitions of ageism where younger people view themselves as different.

Finally, the notion of activity and exercise has been previously noted in research, Lichtenstein et al. (2005) and Ridgway (2015) both identified recreational and physical activities, with walking being popular. However, this study moved away from traditional views of exercise.

Research limitations and recommendations for future research

The results are reflective of one intake of social work students and can therefore not be generalised. The results indicated that several paired questions did not correlate, and it is

recommended that a revision of Kogan's (1961) tool is undertaken. Eight students did not complete stage two and their participation may have altered the findings. It is recommended that a larger study of both undergraduate and postgraduate social work students is considered.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale study at one University. The study however replicated and supported findings of previous research involving health care professionals and non- UK social workers/social work students. The findings revealed that social work programme contributed to the development of more positive attitudes towards older people as the social work students progressed in their learning. Although this is encouraging, work is still needed to advance positive attitudes further. The drawings illustrated the students' perceptions of age and ageing through a social and cultural lens where representational flows, visual signifiers were identified. Further work is required to understand the perceptions of social workers and social work students, in what way these can be embraced in student work education and how education and practice reflect BASW (2017) social work capability statements in curricula.

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Table 1 Social Work Students Characteristics and Attitude Score

Characteristic	KATOPS Mean	SD	KATOPS Mean	SD
	Stage 1	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 2
Age:				
22-29	163.45	16.8	162.43	15.5
30-39	162.43	16.6	165.00	27.8
40-49	171.00	4.5	180.50	12.0
50+	169.00	*	----	----
Gender:				
Male	154.25	19.2	160.67	29.7
Female	157.31	12.9	167.89	14.8

**Only one participant*

Table 2 Comparison of Correlations to Kogan (1961)

Paired Questions	Complete DS	Kogan (1961)
Q1 /Q21	.066	.21-.42
Q2/Q22	.325	.25-.29
Q3/Q20	.396*	.40-.41
Q4/Q19	-.057	.34-.50
Q5/Q23	.217	.07-.14
Q6/Q33	.322	.33-.41
Q7/Q27	.202	.44-.61
Q8/Q10	-.098	.16-.26
Q9 /Q13	-.274	.06-.31
Q12/Q25	.192	.30-.44
Q11/Q34	.434*	.27-.40
Q14/Q26	.142	.18-.27
Q15/Q32	.014	.17-.35
Q16/Q28	-.854**	.12-.24
Q17/Q31	.080	.11-.27
Q18/Q29	-.023	.34-.50
Q24/Q30	.578**	.31-.38