

ATTITUDES TO AGEING: SELF-PERCEPTIONS, IMAGES OF AGEING AND EXPERIENCE OF AGE DISCRIMINATION

Negative stereotypes regarding older people can result in beliefs and expectations that are pertinent to older people and also for those with whom they interact. Such expectations can result in older people being treated less positively than other age-groups. More significantly the stereotypes can result in self-fulfilling prophecies for older people themselves that can result in less satisfactory cognitive performance, physical inactivity, and reduce feelings of well-being. In this article we look at a number of important questions pertaining to attitudes and beliefs regarding older people.

We begin with the question, what are the most **common beliefs** that people share regarding older people? How can we best describe these beliefs; specifically do they fit into the category of '**stereotypes**'? Is there any evidence regarding the **basis** for such beliefs? In this article we look especially at the content of such attitudes. It is also of interest to know how images of ageing are **maintained**, with particular reference to the role of the mass media. Also what is the role of **age-segregation** in fostering stereotypes? Another important question is around the **consequences** of beliefs and images regarding aging. How do they impinge on self-perceptions of older people and their success or failure in various tasks? Finally, it is worth examining the how older people **cope with stereotypes** and the broad question of how such beliefs can **be challenged** in modern society given the variety of changes related to ageing including longevity and the demonstrated competence and continued contribution of older people in so many areas of life including work, social activities and cognitive capacity.

What attitudes and beliefs are prevalent in relation to ageing and older people?

There is a remarkable consistency with regard to the prevalence of beliefs about older people in society. One way of portraying beliefs is the **Stereotype Content model** (SCM) (1). This model provides a unified view for understanding stereotypes regarding virtually all groups while acknowledging that the content of these images

may be quite different from one group to another. Research with different population groups with the SCM has shown that two dimensions are central to describing the images that emerge, viz., **warmth** (e.g., helpful, friendly) and **competence** (able, confident, motivated). Because these two dimensions are independent of each other, particular groups can be perceived to be high on one dimension and low on the other. A summary of the evidence relating to older people suggests a very common pattern; specifically older adults are seen as having little power in society but also as not being competitive. More generally and generalising from these findings, they are seen as **warm but incompetent** (2).

An important feature of beliefs about aging is that surrounding cognitive decline and, especially, around forgetfulness and the belief that older people have a slower rate of thinking. As is evident in the review by Hess (3) stereotypes regarding the memory of older people are extremely common among adults of all ages. What is especially significant is that older adults themselves frequently believe that they have poorer memory and also that they have less control over their memory. While there is some evidence regarding declining memory with aging and some basis for variations regarding self-efficacy of cognitions as people age, the negative images extend to aspects where there is little evidence of cognitive decline (4). In other words, while there may be some basis for believing that memory impairment (especially short-term memory) is associated with ageing, the **popular belief is more pessimistic** than is actually the case.

One important distinction in relation to images and stereotypes of ageing is whether ageism is triggered by benevolent or hostile motivation. North & Fiske (5) claim that **benevolent views** of ageing are widely accepted; these opinions imply thinking of older adults as warm or helpful but incompetent. In contrast, **hostile ageism** is based on stereotypes regarding what older adults should do with the implication that if they go outside these prescribed roles, they should experience negative consequences. The consequences of hostile ageism have been shown in a variety of situations but especially in perceptions of the appropriateness of older people in **high-status positions in employment**. Studies have shown that young adults often regard the hiring of an older person to new high prestige position as a violation of norms regarding ageing (2).

While aspects of negative images of older people are found in many studies (6), an interesting question regarding stereotypes is whether they have become more positive or negative or benevolent/hostile over the years. A study by Ng et al., (7) looked at this question over the last 200 years through an examination of historical documents as well as journals and policy statements. Their findings suggest that age stereotypes have tended to become more negative over the last two centuries. They identify the decade following 1880 when images of old age switched from being positive to negative and continued since then in that trajectory. They take the view that two factors may be responsible for this major change. The first is the tendency to **'medicalise' old age** so that it becomes a condition to be treated rather than a developmental stage. The second is the **proportion of people** living to be older. Whatever the explanation, the prevalence of stereotypes and their

consequences indicate the importance of approaches to challenge these views - a consideration that will be taken up later.

What truth is there in the images and stereotypes that are commonly believed?

An important question concerns the extent to which there is empirical support for the views on aging that are prevalent in our society. There are at least two lines of research that are relevant to this question; one concerns the cognitive abilities of older people and the second is around the effectiveness of older versus younger people at work.

As noted above, the views of cognitive decline that are commonly held tend to exaggerate seriously the extent of cognitive decline associated with ageing. As people get older, some relatively minor features of their abilities tend to decline; but even this effect is compensated for through motivation and experience (8) What is even more interesting is the finding that the research has shown that the scores of aging adults have increased over the decades and no indication that this pattern had reached a plateau. A recent meta-analysis by Trahan et al. (9) across IQ of several decades **showed a gain for each decade.**

Some studies that have examined late-life cognitive abilities and support the results of the Trahan et al. (9) review. Zelinski & Kennison (10) compared cognitive data from two cohorts in the Long Beach longitudinal study. Adults were matched on age but tested 16 years apart. At age 74 average performances among the more recent cohort was equivalent to those people from the older cohort who were up to 15 years younger. A recent study by Karlsson et al. (11) examined cohort differences in fluid cognition (specifically tests of logical reasoning and spatial ability) across three population-based samples in Gothenburg, Sweden with samples born in 1901, 1906 and 1940, when these were 70, 75 and 79 years. The study showed substantial differences in cognitive performance between the cohorts with later born people significantly better than earlier-born cohorts. The conclusion seems warranted that there is even less justification now for holding stereotypes regarding age-related decline, than was the case some decades ago.

The study by Ng & Feldman (12) looked at age stereotypes regarding older workers based on the results of over 400 studies. Of the common stereotypes that were examined all but one were **not supported by the evidence** including that older workers are less motivated, more resistant to change and less healthy and energetic. The only stereotype that was consistent with the empirical evidence was that older workers were less willing to participate in activities aimed at developing their careers.

How are Older People Portrayed in the Mass Media?

An important question arises regarding the way in which older people are portrayed in the mass media including television programmes, advertisements and newspapers. A major theme emerging in this research is that **older people are under-represented** in the media and also shown in **traditional roles**.

The study by Zhang et al. (13) looked at the way in which older adults were shown in advertising in five countries; the US, UK, Germany, China and India. The results showed that older characters were under-represented relative to the population, especially females and ethnic minorities. This outcome is echoed in studies of TV programmes which show that older adults are predominantly portrayed in minor or peripheral roles. The Zhang et al. study showed that while older adults were under-represented and had limited input, the images of older people tended to be quite positive. However, this positive feature was sometimes questionable since **positive images were frequently linked with a negative stereotype**, for example a smiling older adult in an advertisement for a health-related product.

A number of other studies have found the same general pattern. The review by Vasil & Wass (14) is based on 28 empirical studies using analyses of TV characters as well as characters in the print media including children's books as well as magazines. The elderly were found to be under-represented, especially older women and elderly characters tended to be in minor roles. Similarly Kessler et al. (15) in a study of prime-time television series found a relatively small percentage of older people, especially those **of advanced age**. Interestingly they tended to be portrayed positively with regard to their social activities and financial resources.

Some studies have examined specific issues that are of concern to older people. For example, Koskinen et al., (16) examined how newspaper articles that focus on health, portray older people in society, based on Finnish newspapers for a three month period. On the one hand, it was found the message that emerges is that older people and their care is important. On other hand there were suggestions of **paternalistic attitudes** towards older people including an emphasis on the responsibility of family members for older relatives care.

O'Boyle (17) put forward an explanation for the '**bias of youth**' in Irish advertising. He argued that the prioritisation of youth derives at least partly from the need to manage a perceived environment of constant change. Advertisers, he argued see the marketplace as always in transformation resulting in a perceived need to favour youth over older people, and which in turn is central to the beliefs of people in advertising and presumably in the minds of consumers. Thus, technological development tends '*...to perpetuate a binary opposition between the elderly who are often portrayed as Luddites and the young who are the entrepreneurs of change*' (p.53). O'Boyle suggested that occupational suitability in advertising is equated with physically being young. This line of argument is interesting and suggests important links between images in the media and societal values and changes.

A very relevant consideration regarding the influence of the mass media comes from the '**apocalyptic vision**' of major increases in numbers of older people and the financial implications of the required pension support in the future. Frequently newspaper comments are based on projections by national or international organisations with a particular expertise in projections regarding population. One newspaper article (Irish Examiner, May 1st 2013) reported prediction of the Central Statistics Office that by 2021 the number of elderly people will have grown by 200,000. The article referred to a 'financial time bomb' and warns that no plan is in place to cope with this

dramatic rise. Furthermore, there is reference to a yawning gap between the number of younger and older people with implications for pension deficits as well as the greater need for nursing home provision and escalating healthcare costs.

How does age-segregation come about and how does it influence stereotypes?

There is evidence in social psychology that when a group is segregated in society, the social distance created can provide a fertile ground for the growth of negative stereotyping. A Dutch study (18) examined age segregation through the age composition of personal and social networks, thus allowing them to determine the number of young adults that people aged 55-89 identified as members of their networks. In fact they found that for people aged 65-74, the proportion of people under 35 years that they encountered in their network was only one tenth of what might be expected on the basis of population figures. Furthermore only a minority of 15% of people over 80 years had regular contact non-family members under 65. In Ireland, almost half (46%) of adults aged 55+ say that they have a friend under the age of 30 (HaPAI Survey, 2016), and this is higher (60%) among those aged 70+.

The evidence strongly suggests that age-segregation has become a central feature of the housing provision in many western countries. A study of neighbourhoods in the US (19) found that that only one-third of neighbourhoods reflected the age-distribution of the country as a whole. Older adults were over-represented in one quarter of all communities and non-representative neighbourhoods differed in other respects from other areas including ethnic and socio-economic make-up. These findings have important implications for age-segregation as well policies directed at age-friendly communities.

Another study in California (20) investigated the reasons why age-segregation occurs and specifically the reasons that lead community-dwelling older people to relocate to senior housing in California. While senior housing was perceived to be cheaper, safer and might offer better socialising opportunities than conventional housing, the older people in the study often experienced isolation and stress, partly because of the age-segregation and lack of contact with younger people. We will return to the importance of inter-generational contact later in the article.

What are the Effects of Images and Stereotypes on older people's lives?

There is a substantial body of research testifying to the fact when people become aware of stereotypes about them; they then act in a way that can result in a pattern of behaviour that conforms to that stereotype. Examples of this have been found in the educational performance of disadvantaged young people and in various other situations where powerful expectations are brought to bear on performance. The consistent finding is therefore, that stereotypes can result in **self-fulfilling prophecies**. The ways in which this can happen with regard to age-stereotyping is considered here.

A considerable body of research has focused on how **stereotype threat** can undermine cognitive performance among older people. Stereotype threat occurs

when a person faces a situation that put them at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about them. There is evidence older adults are especially vulnerable to age-based stereotype threat (ABST) when they perform memory, cognitive or physical tasks and consequently underperform on the tasks in question. It is especially interesting that in studies in which older people were told that a test was designed to assess the effects of **aging on memory**, they performed less well than control groups not given such information (21).

Thus, with regard to stereotype research, there is substantial evidence for the influence of aging-related beliefs on memory, especially when these are made relevant and threatening. This finding is especially important because an emphasis on the **diagnostic value of tests for assessing memory capacity** of older people may trigger the stereotypes in question. This relationship can work both ways. In a study of performance expectations on completing a balance task, Wulf et al., (22) found that providing fabricated positive feedback to study participants that their performance was above average reduced their concerns about the task, as well as their nervousness. Most importantly, this fabricated positive feedback was associated with better performance in the balance tests among older women, with an average age of 71 years.

Another effect of the experience of stereotype is that older people sometimes see the difficulties they demonstrate **as normal or expected** for their (23). In other words, they revise their expectations regarding aging downward based on negative stereotypes. The justification for this approach is that they are being flexible and adapting to what is real. This change may be the reason why many older people agree with the view that 'As I grow older, things seem better than I thought they would be' (24). The problem with this way of adjusting to the new image is that it involves accepting limitations without efforts to improve on the newly accepted expectation.

Another reaction to stereotypes involves a protection of self-esteem through seeing negative images as applying to other **older people but not to themselves** (25). This is mediated by a defensive process which involves downward social comparison with peers and seeing that they themselves are doing better than the comparison group. For example, an older person may notice that many of his/her acquaintances are showing signs of dementia and conclude that they themselves must be in good shape since peers are showing indications of decline. An example of this process comes from responses to questions asking people how they are faring in relation to indices of ageing compared to people of their own age. The research shows that the vast majority see themselves as doing better especially with measures that are broad but relevant to ageing (24). Another defensive reaction involves pushing out the boundary regarding old age resulting, for example, for people in their sixties identifying old age as relevant to those in their seventies and eighties.

The research in this area leads the conclusion that at several levels stereotypes can have quite negative effects. Ranging from the performance of specific tasks to overall views on self and colleagues, the outcomes have an undermining impact. The

important question is how such images can be managed at the personal level and more significantly how they can be diminished at societal level.

What are the best ways for older people to cope with age stereotypes?

One view of coping with stereotypes takes as a key feature that the experience is stressful and proposes a framework similar to approaches for coping with other stressors (26).. Thus **problem-based coping** might involve confronting the person who expresses the ideas based on such images. While there is substantial evidence for the contribution of a **confrontational approach** in the case of racism or sexism, (2)that this approach may be seldom drawn on by older people for fear of being seen as unreasonable, hostile or over-sensitive.

Emotion-focused coping refers to the effort to deal with the emotional response to the stereotype rather than actually change the situation as in the case of problem-based coping. Typically the older person makes an attribution to protect them, by thinking that there is nothing about their make-up that merits such a portrayal and that the source is biased or prejudiced towards older people. While this approach has been shown to be quite effective in relation to coping with stereotypes of gender and race, the evidence is weaker in the case of stereotypes of older people. The work of Chasteen & Kang (27)found in a role play in a work situation that expression of age stereotypes did indeed result in perceptions of the manager who expressed such ideas as being prejudiced towards older people. However, the older participants still felt the anxiety of rejection despite such reactions.

Finally another approach with deal with age stereotypes involves older people distancing themselves from the target group. For example, feeling **subjectively younger** may be a way of escaping from the negative images and subsequent feelings. A study by Weiss & Freund (28) found that identifying with a younger age group may be effective in avoiding awareness of features of growing old. However, this study was limited in that the negative information concerned aspects of ageing like dementia. It is uncertain whether a similar coping mechanism would operate in relation to less dramatic aspects of age stereotypes.

To summarise, the available evidence indicates that stereotypes regarding ageing can be quite difficult to cope with and some of the ways of dealing with these images have other outcomes that are undesirable either for the older person or for others. For these reasons, there is a need for a broader base to prevent the emergence and development of such stereotypes in a way that is comprehensive and effective.

What cultural/societal changes would prevent development of negative images of ageing?

An examination the various ways in which negative images of ageing can be prevented or changed in the extant research literature, shows that some approaches emphasise a **particular strategy** that has promise in reducing or eliminating stereotypes. However, another perspective looks at the array of influences and advocates policy changes that are likely to have **multiple impacts** at various levels.

With regard to the first of these approaches, some studies have based their ideas on the finding that **contact** between groups has been effective in addressing a range of stereotypes including those with an ethnic origin. Based on this view, the argument has been that intergenerational contact should be appropriate for preventing or addressing age-related negative images. In line with this view, Abrams et al. (29) found that prior contact with grandchildren had the effect of eliminating stereotype threat among a group with a mean age of 69 years. Two aspects of the results are especially interesting; the effect was at least partly mediated by reduced anxiety and the task involved mathematics which has been shown to be an important dimension of stereotyping for older people.

Implications for Positive Ageing in Ireland

The research and evidence we have considered in this article shows how pervasive and powerful age stereotypes tend to be. This carries the strong implication that major initiatives involving national (and international) policies. The World Health Organisation identified **Respect and Social Inclusion** as a core feature of age-friendly communities (30) and this feature deals with attitudes, behaviour and messages of other older people and of the community as a whole towards older people, on the basis that these all affect participation and mental wellbeing (30). Approaches to foster respect and social inclusion include respectful and inclusive services, positive images of ageing, the promotion of intergenerational and family interactions, public education, community inclusion and, economic inclusion (30). These approaches are echoed in the National Positive Ageing Strategy in Ireland (31) and related objectives to combat ageism by mainstreaming ageing and the concerns of older people into national frameworks and strategies, promoting intergenerational solidarity at all levels of society, and, better consultation with older people.

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