Title: Attitudes towards older men and women: An examination of ageism

Abstract

This study was designed to determine current young adults’ attitudes toward older adults, and to explore, more specifically, whether they hold differential attitudes towards older men and women. An additional objective was to examine the effect of knowledge of aging processes on attitudes towards older adults. Four hundred and five (210 males, 195 females) undergraduate students at a small Midwestern university completed questionnaires that measured attitudes toward an older male and an older female, knowledge of aging and provided demographic information. Data reveal that the subjects showed more positive, rather than negative, attitudes towards older adults, with older women being rated significantly more positively than older males. Implications of these findings are discussed.
Introduction

Butler (1969) coined the term “ageism” to refer to a kind of discrimination, similar to racism and sexism, directed toward elderly people. Ageism often results in the attitude that older people are unproductive, sickly, depressing, and that cognitive impairment is normative (Osgood, 1996; Palmore, 1999). A great deal of research attention has been paid to studying attitudes towards older adults and to ways to counteract such biases, and given our rapidly aging society, such research attention has been warranted. However, these studies reached different conclusions. Several studies confirmed the presence of negative attitudes towards older adults (Hummert, 1990; Netz & Ben-Sira, 1993), while other studies found that young adults hold more positive rather than negative views of older adults (Braithwaite, Gibson, & Holman, 1986; Schwalb & Seldacek, 1990; Yenerall, 1995). Some of the inconsistencies in the findings might be explained by the diverse methodologies and attitudinal measures used, including the ‘header’ used for assessment (eg. an elderly person, old person, an old person you know). An additional factor to consider is the lack of specification of the sex of the target older adult in most studies. Given that gender stereotypes among younger subjects have been so well documented, it is surprising that most researchers have ignored the sex of the target older person (while studying the effect of the sex of the respondents), when examining attitudes and beliefs about aging. This is of particular concern when considering the idea that respondents in most studies are not making truly gender-neutral ratings, and in all likelihood, assume that the person being described as “older” or “elderly” is male (Kite & Wagner, 2002). Kite (1996), for example, found that when the gender of the target was unspecified, people assumed an
older ‘worker’ was male and an older ‘homemaker’ was female. In other words, when the gender of the older adult is not specified, respondents tend to draw their own conclusion (Kite & Wagner, 2002). So, specifying the sex of the older adult may serve to clarify attitudes towards older adults in general, and also answer an important question: Is there a double standard of aging? Are older men and women perceived differently by young adults?

This study is an attempt to explore young people’s attitudes toward older adults, and more specifically, examine their views of older men and older women to see if there is indeed a double standard of aging, and fill an important gap in the literature. This study also attempts to examine young adults’ knowledge of aging, and determine if gender, knowledge of aging processes, and exposure to older adults are associated with attitudes toward older adults.

**Method**

**Subjects.** The sample consists of 405 undergraduate students (210 men, 195 women) enrolled in Psychology classes at a small Midwestern university. The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 49 years (M= 20.77, SD=2.56), and were predominantly White (90.3%).

**Measures.**

The *Aging Semantic Differential* (Polizzi’s refined version, 2003) was used to assess attitudes towards older adults. The Aging Semantic Differential (ASD) is an instrument with 24 bipolar adjective pairs (Cronbach alpha of ~.97), with each item having seven response levels (1-7), and yields summary scores from 24 to 168. Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude towards the target person. Subjects were directed to keep the ‘target’ adult (‘a man 70-85 years of age’, or ‘a woman 70-85 years of age’) in mind while completing the scale.
The Facts on Aging Quiz 2 - Multiple-Choice Version (Harris & Changas, 1994) was used to assess subjects’ knowledge of aging. This is a 25-item multiple-choice quiz covering physical, social, and emotional factors that relate to or are common fallacies about old age. Scores range from 0 to 25, with higher scores indicating greater knowledge.

A demographic questionnaire was used to obtain information on age, sex, ethnicity and a few items related to exposure to older adults.

Procedure. Subjects were invited to complete a set of four short questionnaires in their regular classrooms. Each student completed one ASD for a ‘man 70-85 years of age’, and one ASD for a ‘woman 70-85 years of age’ (without using the term ‘old’ or ‘elderly’ in the descriptor to avoid any possible bias that those terms might create), with the order of presentation counterbalanced among subjects, the Facts on Aging Quiz, and a brief demographic questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

Data analyses revealed that the subjects held more positive (rather than negative) attitudes about older men and women. In order to determine if attitudes toward older men were significantly different from attitudes toward older women, and if there were sex differences in the attitudes toward older men and women, and also if there was an interaction between the sex of the older adult and the sex of the subject, a two-way mixed factor ANOVA was conducted. A significant effect for sex of the older adult was found, $F(1, 400) = 57.26, p<.0001$), with older women being rated significantly more positively ($M=119.60, sd=19.74$) than older men ($M=107.43, sd=20.08$). No significant effect of the sex of the subject was found, nor was there a significant interaction between the sex of the subject and the sex of the older adult. When knowledge of aging was incorporated as a covariate, no significant effects were found. Brief analyses of the items on the ASD indicate that older females were rated consistently higher on
each of the characteristics than older males. Preliminary analyses of variables such as
knowledge of aging or exposure to older adults do not show any association with attitudes
toward older adults.

The results of the current study, showing more positive rather than negative attitudes
towards older adults validate some studies that have found more positive views and stereotypes
of the aged. As suggested by some authors, it is possible that such positive views are the result
of today’s young adults growing up in a more open, social climate and in an era of political
correctness and with more positive images of older adults, and so are less inclined to ‘age-bash’
(Harris, 1990; Kalavar, 1997; Yenerall, 1995. The second finding that older women are viewed
more positively than older men was more interesting, because it appears to contradict the widely
held perception of the double standard of aging, even though there has been little systematic
research that evaluates subject’s attitudes while manipulating the sex of the target older adult.
Obviously more studies using the same measure will need to be done to lend support to these
findings. It is also possible that the subjects recruited from Psychology classes (though not
necessarily psychology majors) are inherently more interested in human behaviors and hence
less likely to subscribe to biases and stereotypes, than perhaps those who are not attracted to the
subject matter of Psychology and were not in the subject pool. Future studies would benefit
from sampling a wider pool of subjects. Detailed item analyses of the ADA should provide
additional insights into the particular biases and characteristics associated with older women and
men.

* A paper based on this project has been accepted for presentation at a national conference in New
Orleans(!) In November 2005, and I will submit a copy of that paper for your records after the
conference.
References


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