AGE STEREOTYPING: ARE WE OVERSIMPLIFYING THE PHENOMENON?

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the use of age stereotypes in evaluating individuals' behavior in context-specific situations. One hundred university students assessed young male, young female, old male, and old female characters in four vignettes using the Rosencranz and McNevin Semantic Differential. The data revealed limited but conflicting evidence of the use of stereotypes when the stimuli portrayed target characters in lifelike situations rather than in an experimental vacuum. It is argued that while stereotyping can occur in specific contexts, its form is greatly influenced by other aspects of the situation. The need to reconceptualize the notion of stereotypes of the elderly is discussed, and a shift in emphasis toward the analysis of subgroup stereotypes as opposed to one consistent global stereotype of old age is urged.

A significant body of literature on the problems and difficulties of the elderly in Western societies refers to the existence of a widespread negative stereotype of old age—a set of beliefs ascribing to old people such characteristics as helplessness, dependency, illness, feebleness, passivity, irritability, rigidity, forgetfulness, and general decrements in cognitive processing [1-5]. Researchers warn that once this stereotype is communicated to the elderly by individuals and social institutions, behavior may change to meet expectations of what old people are like, and problems associated with loss of physical and mental capabilities and low morale may be exacerbated [1, 6, 7]. Although data have been forthcoming to demonstrate the existence of a negative stereotype of old age, the findings are by no means unequivocal and are not always consistent across methodologies.

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STEREOTYPING TO THE GENERALIZED TARGET

The most convincing support for negative stereotyping has emerged from a research paradigm that compares semantic differential ratings of the typical young person with ratings of the typical old person. Although the bipolar adjectives used vary somewhat from study to study, the results consistently support the view that the elderly are evaluated less positively than the young, as being less active and effective and more dependent and powerless [8-10]. Using Likert-type responses to a set of attitude statements, Weinberger and Millham similarly report negative evaluations of the elderly [11]. Seventy-year-olds were perceived less favorably than twenty-five-year-olds on satisfaction, adjustment, personality, and dependency measures. Although the consistency in findings for research using this paradigm is impressive, the likelihood that the results are attributable to experimental artifact must be given serious consideration [12, 13].

The Issue of Validity

The paradigm used in the above studies is open to the criticism that it is knowledge of cultural stereotypes that is being measured rather than personal stereotypes [14, 15]. Responses elicited by the procedure may not reflect the individual's personal attitudes and beliefs about the young and old at all. Instead the task may be construed by respondents as an opportunity to demonstrate their awareness of the beliefs and attitudes to aging that are presumed prevalent in the community.

Such a response may be understood in terms of demand characteristics [13]. It is obvious to participants that the researcher wishes to characterize a group and, in so doing, set it apart from another group. When age of the target is the only information given, the discriminating dimension cannot escape notice. In other circumstances, responding in terms of cultural stereotypes is the only option available. Some respondents may not hold a stereotyped view of the elderly. Yet, if they are to meaningfully complete the task, they need to form such a stereotype [12]. The easiest response is to adopt that promulgated by the culture.

Thus, the research paradigm which has been most successful in eliciting stereotypes of the elderly leads individuals to respond in a stereotyped manner and may be yielding data that have more to do with cultural mythology than actual stereotyping by individuals.

The Issue of Generalizability

Apart from the problem of validity, the generalizability of the findings emerging from this research paradigm is open to question. The research paradigm involves judgments about the "typical" group member, a situation far removed from real life where individuals are evaluated as they behave in certain contexts. When ratings for specific elderly targets have been correlated with those for old
people in general, little relationship has been found [11]. Yet it is the actual use of stereotypes in dealing with particular individuals and the consequent detrimental effects on the behavior of the elderly that is regarded with concern.

**STEREOTYPING TO THE SPECIFIC TARGET**

Where researchers have introduced specific individuals as targets, there has been a marked failure to obtain negative stereotypical responses. Consistently, it has been found that older persons are not evaluated more negatively than their younger counterparts, whether they be male or female job applicants [16, 17], authors [18], speakers on ecology [14, 19], or supposedly ordinary men and women [11, 20]. It is, however, premature to accept these findings as an accurate reflection of the way in which elderly individuals are evaluated by others.

**The Issue of Credibility**

Just as support for negative stereotyping of the elderly may be an artifact of the research paradigm adopted, so too may be the failure to find evidence of negative stereotyping with particular individuals. In the person perception literature, Beilin [21] and Brigham [15] have recognized the extent to which supplementary information can overshadow central cues in impression formation. Connor et al. [17] and Connor and Walsh [16] endorse this view by attributing their failure to find evidence of age stereotyping to the dominance of characteristics other than age.

A further limitation on the circumstances in which stereotypes of any kind are employed has been outlined by Ehrlich [22]. He argues against the proposition that individuals who hold stereotypes use them against all individuals belonging to a particular group. Ehrlich maintains that individuals must show some characteristic of the stereotyped group before stereotyping will occur. If other data result in the individual being perceived as different from the group, the stereotype is less likely to influence the perceiver's judgments.

This argument has been considered relevant to the age stereotyping literature where specific individuals have been used [12]. In the research reported to date, the target persons contrast with rather than conform to stereotypes of the elderly. If the stereotype of the elderly evokes concepts such as passivity, inactivity, withdrawal from others, irritability, and powerlessness, respondents will not be expecting active, alert, wordly targets, nor job applicants, authors, and guest speakers on ecology.

**THE GOALS OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH**

In order to advance our knowledge of the use of stereotyping in specific contexts, there is a need to use targets acting in a manner that is more consistent with expected elderly behavior. This raises the important issue of what constitutes
expected elderly behavior and the even more difficult question of how one representatively samples from such a domain. For the purposes of the current study, the targets had to be displaying at least one of the characteristics linked with old age stereotyping—irritability, passivity, helplessness, dependency, rigidity, conservatism, or general decrements in cognitive functioning. The sampling issue is less readily resolved. This study does seek to provide some diversity in contexts, however, rather than the ubiquitous one that has characterized age stereotyping research to date. Such an approach at least safeguards against drawing conclusions from findings that are a direct result of the idiosyncrasies of a particular situation chosen for investigation.

This study examines the influence of age stereotyping when semantic differential evaluations are made of the central characters in four vignettes. The major criterion for selection of the stories was that the behaviors be credible for the elderly and manifest one of the characteristics of age stereotyping mentioned above. Ten judges were involved in the selection process.

The first story detailed the thoughts of a person coming to terms with the death of a loved one. Reactions of grief, guilt, and relief were all present, but the overall mood was one of quiet acceptance. This vignette was considered particularly suited to the elderly because dealing with death is a relatively common experience for this age group. Furthermore, the reaction was in keeping with the aged stereotype of acceptance and passivity.

The second story recounted the reaction of a politician accused of shirking his responsibility in not supporting a piece of legislation. The response is aggressive and pragmatic—don’t fight for legislation that is bound to be defeated and jeopardize more important legislation. The aggressiveness conforms to the stereotype of the elderly as irritable and difficult to get along with, while the failure to support legislation is consistent with inactivity and conservatism.

Story three traces the efforts of a person to cope with an approaching fire. The central character is powerless, afraid though calm, yet annoyed that no one has come to help. This vignette conforms to the stereotype of the elderly as irritable and dependent.

The final story describes the home of a person who has long since relinquished concern about good housekeeping or household safety. The description is in keeping with the image of the elderly as unable to care for themselves.

Because previous research has shown that the sex of the target person may influence evaluations [9, 18, 23], the sex of the character was manipulated as an independent variable along with age.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were seventy-one female and twenty-nine male psychology students. All were undergraduates in the first or second year of their course.
Procedure

Each participant was given a booklet in which the four stories were presented in a random order and in which the central characters were either all young men, young women, old men, or old women. A between-students design for the sex and age variables was preferred so as to minimize the likelihood of students guessing the purpose of the research. Each condition was represented by twenty-five students. After reading each story, respondents evaluated the central character by completing the Aging Semantic Differential [10]. All questionnaires were anonymous. At the conclusion of the testing session, students were asked to write what they thought the purpose of the experiment was on the back of the booklet.

RESULTS

The Dependent Variables

Following Rosencranz and McNevin [10], respondents were assigned scores on three scales within the Aging Semantic Differential: Effectiveness, Autonomy, and Personal Acceptability. The three scales were examined for their internal consistency over the various conditions in the present study. The alpha reliability coefficients for the Personal Acceptability Scale ranged from .76 to .89 with a median of .84. For the Autonomy Scale, the range extended from .64 to .88, median .77. The Effectiveness Scale ranged from .71 to .89 with a median of .80. Although these reliability coefficients were all satisfactory, some doubts were raised about the validity of the scales when the correlations between them were examined. The majority were remarkably high, suggesting that Personal Acceptability, Autonomy and Effectiveness were not distinctly different dimensions. The correlations between the Personal Acceptability and Autonomy Scales ranged from .27 to .74 (median .64); between Personal Acceptability and Effectiveness, .56 to .87 (median .60); and between Autonomy and Effectiveness, .56 to .87 (median .75). Since the correlations between scales approached in magnitude the internal consistencies of the scales, the entire instrument was factor analyzed using the principal axes method and the resulting solution was rotated by the varimax procedure [24].

Four dimensional solutions accounting for between 51 and 58 percent of the variance consistently proved optimal across the four stories. For three of the stories—death, politics, and fire—the interpretation of the factors was comparable. The first was labeled effectiveness and resembled Rosencranz and McNevin’s Effectiveness Scale. The defining items were “decisive,” “productive,” “independent,” “self-reliant,” “active,” “busy,” “strong,” and “healthy.” The second factor had notable loadings for “generous,” “cooperative,” “friendly,” “truthful,” “tolerant,” and “pleasant” and was labeled congeniality. It bore some similarity to the Rosencranz and McNevin Personal Acceptability measure.
The remaining two factors were less well defined and not relevant to the issue of age stereotyping. It was anticipated that the elderly targets would be perceived as less congenial in the fire and politics stories and as less effective in the politics, fire, and death stories if respondents were using age stereotypes. Respondents were assigned scores on effectiveness and congeniality by summing ratings for items defining each dimension.

For the fourth story concerning housekeeping, the factor structure was slightly different. Again the first two factors were the most relevant to age stereotyping. Although they were similar to effectiveness and congeniality, they had a slightly different emphasis.

Factor one was defined by "decisive," "productive," "active," "busy," "rich," "handsome," "exciting," "aggressive," "progressive," "expectant," "hopeful," and "flexible" and was labeled achievement and success. The second factor, called a positive outlook on life, was defined by "generous," "cooperative," "friendly," "tolerant," "pleasant," "trustful," "optimistic," "satisfied," and "happy." The first dimension was expected to discriminate between the young and old targets if age stereotyping was operative in evaluating targets in the housekeeping story.

The Effect of the Independent Variables in the Death, Politics, and Fire Stories

For effectiveness, and subsequently congeniality, the effect of the character's age and sex was assessed by means of a 2 (age) X 2 (sex) X 3 (context) analysis of variance, context being a repeated measures variable representing the three stories yielding comparable factor structures. Significant main effects emerged, as expected, for the context variable on both dimensions—effectiveness, $F(2,192) = 75.44, p < .001$, and congeniality, $F(2,192) = 29.32, p < .001$—indicating that the students did evaluate the characters in the three stories differently. Neither manipulation of the character's age nor sex, however, produced significant main effects. Thus, there is no evidence of respondents consistently applying age or sex stereotypes involving effectiveness or congeniality across these three contexts.

If, however, such stereotypes are evoked only under certain circumstances, significant interaction effects should emerge between age (or sex) and context. The age X context interaction did prove significant for congeniality, $F(2,192) = 3.78, p < .05$, but not for effectiveness. Although the interaction for congeniality was expected, the findings were not entirely consistent with predictions. Instead of being perceived more negatively in both the politics and fire stories, the elderly were perceived more positively in the politics context ($\bar{x} = 24.6$ for males and $23.7$ for females compared with $21.6$ and $22.7$ respectively) and more negatively in the fire context ($\bar{x} = 26.8$ for males and $27.9$ for females compared with $29.7$ and $28.6$ respectively).
The sex by context interaction was significant only on the effectiveness dimension, $F(2,192) = 7.27, p < .001$. Here, sex role expectations may be relevant to the findings. Where women were in nontraditional sex roles (politics and fire), they were perceived as more effective than men ($\bar{x} = 44.9$ for old and 43.8 for young compared with 38.8 and 40.6 respectively in the politics story; $\bar{x} = 43.6$ for old and 44.6 for young compared with 40.8 and 42.3 respectively in the fire story). When behaving in a sex-typed fashion (death story), they were judged less effective ($\bar{x} = 30.3$ for old and 31.9 for young compared with 32.7 and 34.2 respectively).

**The Effect of the Independent Variables in the Housekeeping Story**

For the housekeeping story, $2$ (age) $\times$ $2$ (sex) analyses of variance were performed using scores on the achievement and success factor and positive outlook on life factor as the dependent variables. The only significant finding was an unexpected interaction between age and sex on the positive outlook on life dimension, $F(1,94) = 3.94, p < .05$. Old men were regarded more unfavorably than young men ($\bar{x} = 39.7$ compared with 43.9), and young women were regarded more unfavorably than old women ($\bar{x} = 40.8$ compared with 43.6).

The analysis of respondents' views on the nature of the experiment suggested that for the most part, participants did not suspect that the study was about age or sex stereotyping. The most frequently perceived purpose of the exercise was simply to investigate impression formation.

**DISCUSSION**

This study sought to examine the use of age stereotypes when respondents were asked 1) to evaluate specific males and females 2) dealing with real life situations 3) which could credibly be experienced by individuals of any age. Unlike previous studies, the current research allowed targets to display some attributes consistent with old age stereotypes—irritability, passivity, helplessness, dependency, rigidity, or general decrements in cognitive functioning. It was anticipated that these cues would facilitate age stereotyping on these and perhaps other dimensions. Furthermore, rather than examining the use of stereotypes in one particular context as has been done in the past, the present study required respondents to make judgments in four different contexts. Although this aspect of the design does not representatively sample contexts, it provides a partial safeguard against generalizing from situations where stereotyping effects result from the idiosyncrasies of the particular situation chosen for investigation.

The data from the study clearly demonstrate that age stereotypes related to congeniality and effectiveness are not applied in an indiscriminating manner when evaluating specific elderly individuals. That they can be used, however, was
demonstrated by the elderly target being judged less congenial than the young target in the fire story and by the old man having a less positive outlook on life than his young counterpart in the housekeeping story. Although these may well be examples of discrimination, they should nevertheless be kept in perspective. Just as the elderly were perceived more negatively in the fire and the male housekeeping vignettes, the young were perceived more negatively in the politics and female housekeeping vignettes—examples of discrimination again but this time against the young. To further provide perspective on the significant findings, it will be recalled that negative stereotyping of the elderly was anticipated in six cases: cues regarding passivity or helplessness were present in three stories, irritability in two, and inability to cope in one. Only one of these predictions was confirmed by the data. At this point, one should ask the question, “has the phenomenon of old age stereotyping been greatly exaggerated?” These data suggest an affirmative answer to this question. Nevertheless, some qualifications are in order which have important implications for future work.

The first issue concerns instruments used for measuring stereotypes when specific targets are used. The Rosencranz and McNevin Semantic Differential was designed for use when the targets were simply persons of a certain age. In the current study, where evaluations were made of specific individuals behaving in particular contexts, the instrument did not display the same psychometric properties and, indeed, did not show stability in its structure across all contexts. When individualized targets are used, there may be advantages in using instruments specifically designed to measure the attributes of interest in that context; a procedure which has been followed by Walsh and Connor [18].

A further problem associated with the use of semantic differential ratings is that the two or three scales underlying them may be too broad in scope to detect stereotyping on only one particular facet. For instance, stereotypes relating to passivity and dependency had to be assessed through the effectiveness scale in the current study. Unless stereotyped responses generalized to all aspects of effectiveness, it is likely that the instrument was not sufficiently sensitive to reflect differences. Needless to say, significant effects are unlikely to be revealed by using the particular items tapping these facets, since they would contain too much error variance.

The other implications of the study relate to the target stimuli. One of the major objectives of this research was to ask respondents to judge individuals in lifelike situations. In so doing, respondents were presented with a great deal of information, only a small proportion of which involved cues relevant to age stereotypes. Following the debriefing of respondents after the experiment, it became clear that the age stereotyping cues were not so much overlooked as interacting with other information available. This overall conceptualization was probably influencing evaluations of the targets. For instance, in the politics story, anger was expressed by both young and old as was conservatism. Yet, for
the elderly politician, this behavior seems to have been far more acceptable. In
the young politician, it may have been linked with arrogance and personal
ambition. Here the additional information probably involved views about
politicians—indeed stereotypes of politicians.

Future research on stereotypes of the elderly must carefully examine the role
played by other information and the way in which it interacts with stereotyping
and age cues. Although systematically varying the amount and type of
information given and examining effects on age stereotyping is an obvious way
to proceed, an alternative approach may also prove fruitful.

The alternative would aim to control the interaction between additional
information and age by changing our conceptualization of stereotypes of the
elderly. Previous research has failed to produce convincing evidence that age
stereotypes of the elderly are applied indiscriminately when evaluating elderly
individuals. This raises the issue of whether the unit of analysis that should be
studied is not so much the elderly as a group but rather subgroups of the aged,
e.g., the handicapped elderly, the socially withdrawn elderly, the socially involved
elderly, or the wise and experienced elderly. To reconceptualize stereotypes of
the aged in this way allows for both positively and negatively stereotyped groups.

CONCLUSION

Researchers have assumed for too long that there is a stereotype that describes
a group and that this stereotype operates when individual group members are
recognized. The current data suggest the need for future research to take greater
heed of the interaction between perceived behaviors and age. Once behavioral
information is provided, the stimulus is no longer just a person of a certain age.
The stimulus becomes a person of a certain age acting in a particular way. In
other words, images of the dependent elderly, or the wise elderly, or the isolated
elderly are likely to be evoked, and these concepts will influence impressions,
expectations, and interaction patterns. If the impact of stereotyping on
individual behavior is to be adequately explored, such subgroup as opposed to
global stereotypes should become the focus of future measurement and
theoretical elaboration.

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