

DIMENSIONS IN ATTITUDES TOWARD THE AGED

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Abstract

A description of attitudes toward the aged is based on a factor analysis of ratings by 456 participants, aged 14 to 40, on 69 bipolar variables. The five major dimensions emerging and subsequently used to describe the aged are: Integrity, Fortitude, Social Appeal, Dependableness and Open-mindedness. Initial ratings on the 69 variables are, for the most part, strongly in the socially desirable direction yielding a very positive portrait of the aged. The results suggest a necessary reconsideration of the negative social images of the aged imparted within much literature on gerontology.

Résumé

Une description des attitudes envers les personnes âgées a été basé sur une analyse à facteurs statistiques des estimations numériques faite par 456 participants d'âge 14 à 40 sur 69 variables bipolaires. Les cinq dimensions majeure qui émergeront et qui ensuite seront utilisées pour décrire les personnes âgées sont: l'intégrité, le bravoure, l'appel social, la confiance et l'impartialité. Les estimations numériques initiales sur les 69 variables, pour la plus part, sont fortement dans une direction socialement souhaitable, accomodant un portrait très positif des personnes âgées. Les résultants suggèrent une reconsidération nécessaire des images sociales negatives qu'on trouve envers les personnes âgées dans beaucoup de littérature en gérontologie.

According to one elderly respondent in this study: "The elderly are seen as expendable supercargo, an attitude which increases as government costs rise." Indeed much literature on the aged suggests such negative social attitudes are rampant as members of different age, professional and socio-status groups approach the elderly. A similar theme seems to have been adopted by many members of the media who give the difficulties and depressions of the aged more attention than their leadership and social contribution. In spite of much interest and attention in the process of aging, the dimensions underlying perceptions of the aged have not been explored nor has the generality of such dimensions across different age, sex and socio-economic status groups. The present study takes a first step in describing the dimensions used by participants, aged 14 to 40, to perceive the elderly.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Work on attitudes toward the elderly in North America has generally shown that they are perceived in a more negative and stereotyped fashion than are younger age groups. Rosencranz and McNevin (1969) report that older males are judged by younger subjects to be ineffectual, more dependent and less acceptable than either young

or middle aged males while Naus (1973) reports that undergraduate students believe older males to be less decisive and instrumental than younger men. Medical students (Ciccetti, 1973), graduate students (Tuckman and Lorge, 1953) and college students (Weinberger and Milham, 1975) are all found to perceive the elderly in a negative manner as do the members of some professional groups. For example, Moberg (1969) reports that ministers perceive the elderly as forgetful, unwanted and slow. Longino and Kitson (1977) support Moberg's findings although they note that: "clergy with a more expressive orientation to their occupational roles derive greater satisfaction from ministering to the aged (p. 334)." Coe (1967) reports that physicians, dentists, social workers, nurses and physical therapists tend to view aging as a deteriorative process, both mental and physical, and perceive the aged as rigid, unadaptable and slow to respond to treatment. Though such conclusions are repeated by others (Kahana & Coe, 1969; Lowenthal & Simon, 1971) two cautionary notes must be added. First the attitudes expressed by professionals may be due to the states of those elderly people they encounter in their work rather than to generalizations about all elderly people. Second many of the studies report negative attitudes in

comparison with other groups rather than absolute values showing negative stereotypes.

A few studies contradict the preceding findings. Kahana (1968) reports that younger children prefer elderly grandparents more than do older children. Similarly, Britton and Britton (1968, 1969), Ivester and King (1977), Thomas & Yamamoto (1975) and Lister, Signori and Kozak (1978, Note 2) report that young children do not hold the negative attitudes toward the elderly which Hickey and Kalish (1967, 1968) suggest. Thorson, Whatley and Hancock (1974) conclude that younger and better educated subjects hold more positive attitudes toward the elderly. A study by Signori and Kozak (1976, Note 3) reports that the elderly describe their age cohorts in a highly favourable way while believing that the rest of society sees them as second class citizens. Though it would appear that studies of attitudes toward the elderly may be classified according to positive or negative descriptions of those attitudes, great difficulty is encountered in assessing the studies due to the intervention of variables which may have confounding effects, such as race (Jackson, 1971; Thune, 1968; Wylie, 1971), health (Kimsey, Roberts, Logan, Logsdon & Holcomb, 1970; Bultena & Oyler, 1971) and ethnic status (Crouch, 1972; Simos, 1970).

Despite such difficulties a further question to be investigated is whether a factorial structure exists which may be used to describe the elderly and whether it is applicable to the perceptions of a wide group of individuals. Such a factor structure would permit one to summarize the basis upon which positive or negative labels are applied to a group and this approach has been demonstrated in a previous study of disadvantaged groups by Butt and Signori (1976). The question of whether such a factor structure exists has been ignored in gerontology whereas it has become an area of speculation in general psychology when attempting to analyze social perceptions toward events or people (Cattell, 1977).

METHOD

Participants

Participants include 222 males and 234 females with similar age distributions between 14 and 40 years of age with a mean of 23.7 years and a standard deviation of 5.3 years. They represent various educational classes and social groups residing in Vancouver, B.C. and outlying lower mainland areas.

Measurements

A revised adjectival checklist originally developed by Signori, Sampson and Rempel (1968) was administered. It consists of 69 bipolar scales including most of the items appearing in the

previous version of the scale as well as adjectives which the elderly were found to use in describing their age cohorts (Signori & Kozak, 1976, Note 3). Possible order effects were minimized by using two forms of the instrument (one reversed) which were distributed to alternate participants. The instructions and some sample items from the checklist follow:

INSTRUCTIONS: Check the position on each scale that most closely represents what you believe about people over 65 years of age. If you cannot decide check a neutral point in the middle of the scale. 1=low, 7=a high amount of the trait.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. quitting, fickle | 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - | endurance, persistence |
| 2. determined, ambitious | 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - | aimless, purposeless |
| 3. subjective, personal | 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - | objective, impartial |

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Male and female data were combined for the factor analyses, because it was found that preliminary and separate factor analyses of male and female data showed similar factor structures and variable loadings. Given that the major purpose of the data analyses was to isolate descriptive dimensions used in perceiving the elderly, it was decided that clarity and simplicity would result from combining the data. Any differences between males and females on the factors could be explored by contrasting the resulting factor scores by sex of rater. A five factor solution with varimax rotation (Halm, 1970; Note 1) was therefore extracted from the data. Squared multiple correlations were placed in the diagonals of the matrix. This was followed by the computation of average factor scores for the male and female raters on each factor. A five factor solution was selected as the analyses produced five factors with eigenvalues over 1, accounting for 37 per cent of the variance and these were readily interpretable in terms of the highest loading variables. Results are reported in Table 1 for the eight highest loading variables on each factor along with the mean rating of each variable. An Hotelling T^2 statistic based upon mean factor scores by sex did not reach significance.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Five major dimensions describing the perceptions of the raters may be summarized as follows. *Factor I: Integrity.* The individual's degree of socialization of internalization is suggested. It reflects the integrity dimension in Erickson's (1963) eight stages of psycho-social development (the eighth and last stage, integrity versus despair). Descriptions accompanying high scores on the factor are conscionable, sociable, emphatic and truthful. Low scores would suggest the converse. *Factor II: Fortitude.* This factor

TABLE I
Factorial Results, Variable Loadings and Mean Variable Ratings*

Factor number	I	II	III
Factor name	Integrity	Fortitude	Social Appeal
Eigenvalue	16.3	4.0	2.3
Per cent variance	23.6	5.8	3.3
Variable loadings	kind, gentle .61 (5.3)	healthy, well .68 (3.1)**	delightful, .63 (4.7)
defining each	truthful, hon- .59 (5.5)	strong, vigorous .58 (3.7)**	exquisite .59 (4.8)
factor	orable well-mannered, .58 (5.1)	involved, parti- .57 (4.0)	enhances, .58 (4.7)
	lovely people	cipating	advances
	agreeable, .57 (4.5)	energetic, .56 (4.0)	talented, .57 (4.6)
	understanding	active	gifted
	mature, .56 (5.3)	determined, .55 (4.4)	insightful, .56 (5.2)
	adjusted	ambitious	intuitive
	controlled, .54 (5.3)	assertive, .52 (4.2)	appreciative, .51 (4.6)
	disciplined	aggressive	industrious, .50 (5.0)
	sacrificing, .52 (5.1)	enthusiastic, .52 (4.2)	productive
	giving	zestful	clean, well- .50 (5.0)
	possess dignity .47 (5.3)	independent, .47 (4.4)	groomed
	self-respect	self-sufficient	humorous, witty .50 (4.9)
Factor number	IV	V	
Factor name	Dependableness	Open-mindedness	
Eigenvalue	1.5	1.4	
Per cent variance	2.0	2.0	
Variable loadings	reliable, .56 (5.3)	flexible, .54 (3.6)**	
defining each	responsible .53 (4.7)	persuasive .49 (1.4)**	
factor	restrained, .44 (5.1)	liberal, .46 (4.5)	
	temperate	radical	
	co-operative, .43 (5.0)	patient, .41 (2.5)**	
	helpful	tolerant	
	conscientious, .39 (5.6)	universal, .38 (4.4)	
	scrupulous	broad-minded	
	careful, .38 (4.7)	trusting, .36 (3.4)**	
	cautious	adaptable	
	methodical, .38 (5.4)	sexually .35 (4.0)	
	efficient	permissive	
	honest, .36 (4.3)	reticent, .33 (3.5)**	
	trustworthy	discrete	
	self-deprecia- .36 (4.3)	objective, .33 (3.5)**	
	ating, modest	impartial	

* Mean variable ratings on the seven point scale follow the factor loadings in parentheses.

All data in the table are based upon the ratings of the total number (N = 456) of participants.

** Ratings below "4" place the targeted (people 65 years or older) group toward the opposites of the labels noted in the Table.

draws together the qualities of strength, vigor and assertiveness as well as motivation, training and competence (at lower levels of loadings not listed in Table) expressed by the individual. *Factor III: Social Appeal.* Variables defining Factor III refer to characteristics and qualities which at the favourable end of the scales would lead to the desirability of the individual in a social context. It includes the social skills and sensitivity that serve to delight, entertain and enhance others. *Factor IV: Dependableness.* This factor refers to reliance and predictability at the favourable end of the dimension and the converse at the opposite end. Anchoring adjectives suggest restraint and control along with a commitment to promises, responsibilities and positive social values. *Factor*

V: Open-mindedness. Factor V taps the degree of flexibility, tolerance and willingness to change at the favoured end and rigidity and conservativeness at the other. Too high or too low a score on this factor might be considered deviant and the aged receive their most neutral and some of their lowest ratings on these variables. In summary, we suggest these factors represent the five major dimensions along which the under 40 study participants perceived the aged on the variables presented.

Turning to the variable ratings which yield the factors, one finds the mean ratings are on the whole high and that many raters chose a category "7" (the most socially desirable category) rating for the aged. However there are a significant number of ratings falling in categories "2" and "3" and

a few variables on which several deviant raters award a category of "1". For example 12 males and 26 females give the most extreme negative rating to the aged on "rigid and stubborn" as opposed to "flexible and persuasable". Similarly the aged are described by many raters as being narrow-minded, inflexible and traditional. Of the few negative ratings given the aged, most contribute to the fifth factor, Open-mindedness. This suggests a similar finding to Butt and Signori's (1976) in their studies of disadvantaged groups. When the social image of a group features a negative stereotype, it is often because that group possesses or is perceived as possessing one undesirable feature which over-rides several positive ones. The fact that Open-mindedness emerges as a dimension indicates participants are divided on the attribution of this characteristic.

The overall pattern of mean ratings is markedly positive showing that this sample of respondents, similar to that of Thorson, Whatley and Hancock (1974), describe persons over 65 years of age as possessing favourable and beneficial human qualities. Such results imply that we must be vigilant about the particular criteria used in studies of attitudes and approaches toward the aged as well as about the scales used, the conditions of the studies and the conclusions drawn. It may be that when professionals rate the aged they base their views upon negative images derived from their work with elderly people who are ill or downcast. For example, one rater in the present study, a psychiatric nurse, specifically commented that she saw only disturbed elderly persons and that her perceptions of the aged were due to her work. She handed in an extremely negative set of ratings. It may be that other raters are influenced by the media which frequently focus upon the governmental and economic neglect of elderly people who are also poor. Perhaps some ratings are influenced through associations of age with death. Other studies may have presented items for rating which assess the elderly on traits which are highly valued for material and economic performance rather than on traits which tap social interest and humanistic concerns. The impression from the present study is that raters are willing to reflect on and to recognize the humanity, understanding, sensitivity, experience and willingness to contribute, of older persons. If this attitude is carried over and implemented in the treatment of older people in our society, then the future holds much promise for the mutual growth of members of all age levels.

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Reference Notes

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