

Effect of stereotypes on well-being



An important aspect of physical functioning is the ability to stay balance. How may expectations generated by age stereotypes influence older adults' balance performance? Critically review psychological theory and research relevant to this issue, and discuss broader implications for interventions that may support healthy physical functioning of older persons.

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Abstract

A decrease in physical functionality in the older generations may cause younger people in the society to view them as immobile and incapable. It has been shown that age stereotypes will impact an individual's life, depending on circumstances and the individual himself. This essay has evaluated the possible effects that positive and negative stereotypes have towards older adults and their physical well-being. This shows that age stereotype is not entirely negative, it can be of benefit to the older people if used appropriately. At the same time, limitations such as the older adults' emotional well-being and considerable individual differences were also highlighted. Some possible interventions such as the blurring of intergroup boundaries and the reframing of one's threat into challenges were also included to provide an in-depth analysis of this age stereotype context and on ways that society can help these older people to lead a meaningful and healthy lifestyle.

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An increase in chronological age inevitably leads to a gradual declination of overall functioning as well as mobility for humans (Wulf, Chiviawowsky, & Lewthwaite, 2012). Not only do such declines have an impact on one's daily living, it can also generate a stir of varying comments and opinions towards individuals within this category – the older adults. Age stereotypes are stereotypical opinions concerned with age, hence older adults are being critically judged on due to their inability to be as mobile or as functional as the young. Age stereotypes arises with the existence of the many social media platforms where younger generations are at a higher chance of being exposed to critical comments that typically target older adults in general (Levy, 2009). It is important to highlight the possible effects that age stereotypes have on older adults because this can in fact, affect them in one way or another, regardless of whether it is positive or negative.

The manipulative context of society can greatly influence the basic survival and task-orientation of the older adults (Marques, Lima, Abrams & Swift, 2014). When age stereotypes are made, older adults may internalize these negative comments and discriminatory behavior. The internalization of age stereotypes may lead to a decrease in the embarkation of a healthy lifestyle (Emile, Chalabaev, Stephan, Corrion & d'Arripe-Longueville, 2014). With time, they can be less self-accepting in terms of their physical ability to balance as well as their health. Their perception of themselves will be tainted by society's expectations, hence gradually believing that they are not able to physically function as well as they thought they can. This internalization is

detrimental to the older adults' overall mental and physical health because they are perceived to be weak and not being given a chance to defend themselves, which leads them to passively accept inaccurate facts about them and their worth.

Stereotypes in general can function as to improve or deflate performance level by older adults (Shih, Richeson, Ambady, Fujita & Gray, 2002). This means that negative stereotypes can affect an individual negatively and vice versa. When younger people judge older adults based on their reduced capacity in doing things, it tends to reduce their self-efficacy. The reduction of self-efficacy of these older adults leads them into thinking that they are incapable in completing a task and society views them as “useless”, hence restraining them from possibly putting their best efforts into it. In contrast, positive activation of stereotypes can boost physical and mental performance by older adults. Positive age stereotypes can be a stereotype which can benefit them and increase their confidence. This in turn enhances the motivation of the older adults to strive and to perform better than otherwise expected.

This study that was done by the authors has effectively shown that age stereotypes may not be only bad as it can be used positively to enhance motivation in the older adults. Younger people tend to have a warped perspective of all older adults in the society based on their strength and ability to move around freely. It is thus essential to change this mindset and instill the right thinking and understanding that older adults are just as motivated as they are, despite having a slight declination in their muscular performance. Hence, the younger generations should be more supportive

towards the older adults which may effectively enable them to improve their physical level and balance.

The authors have also indicated how the various types of stereotypes can influence individuals in different ways. However, it did not effectively evaluate on how it affects the individuals in terms of emotional factors, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-concept. It is of utmost importance to understand and highlight these emotional elements because they play a major role in increasing or decreasing motivation in older adults.

Discriminatory views can jeopardize one's self-concept and self-esteem. It has shown that these two elements are linked to both emotional as well as cognitive factors (Swann Jr., Chang- Schneider & McClarty, 2007). Low self-concept would enable a person to think lesser of themselves in terms of their age in relation to their capacity as compared to the young while low self-esteem would lead to one to reduce his emotional evaluation of himself, hence he may begin to belittle himself and hold onto false beliefs based on the opinions that society has towards him. Motivation increases in relation to self-efficacy, which is a key component in healthy emotional and physical well-being (Brown, Joscelyne, Dorfman, Marmar & Bryant, 2012). Having a positive image of oneself enables an individual to believe in himself and subsequently, improves his will power and physical performance level.

Therefore, it would be much comprehensive if these related factors were being evaluated in the study. In addition, this study did not take into account that there are certainly a number of strong-willed older adults that may not be affected by these negative threats. Group threats are socially displayed when the activation of negative stereotype is made to question the

competency of a group (Wout, Danso, Jackson & Spencer, 2008). This would also mean that the older adults who highly identify themselves with the age stereotypes would be adversely affected while those who do not will be the least affected. This distinction will also mean that different elderly will be affected by the stereotypical comments at a different level, hence the impact towards each of them differs greatly. It is thus beneficial to understand the individual differences within such a study.

Although stereotypes may be used in a positive light as mentioned, it is still widely being understood that this term is generally used to portray a negative meaning. It is thus essential to understand the need to reduce these negative age stereotypes and induce certain measures that can support healthy physical functioning in older adults. Rosenthal and Crisp, 2006 have suggested that the placing of different individuals into categories give a psychological perception that makes people think that they are in fact different from those not in their group. This then produces the in-groups and out-groups discrimination. The authors have thus shown that one method that could be used is the blurring of intergroup boundaries. Any similarities found within each group causes some overlap, and this in turn may cause a gradual reduction of a distinction between “ us” and “ them”. This shows that younger people who discriminate against the older adults may have some weaknesses themselves. Every individual has

their strengths and weaknesses, embracing their strengths and only seeing other people’s weaknesses can be detrimental to one’s emotional well-being. By acknowledging this slight similarity of weaknesses that some young

people may have like the older adults, it will eventually reduce the stereotypical threats made against older adults.

Alter, Aronson, Darley, Rodriguez and Ruble, 2010 have done a study which indicated that that by reinterpreting a threatened task as a possible personal challenge, there will be a significant reduction in stereotype threat for the older adults. When the younger generations stereotype the older adults in society, many a times, older adults see it as a threat which subsequently influences them in a negative way. However, if older adults transform their way of thinking that their threatened ability in a particular task is being challenged, they will be more likely to work harder to prove that they are not what society perceives them to be – incapable. It may not seem like an easy task for the older adults, but with constant reminders and practice, they will be able to accept future threats as challenges placed for them in life. With this positive way of outlook, older adults will be able to live a meaningful life with minimal setbacks as opposed to others who take those threats personally, which will in turn cause them to underestimate themselves.

In conclusion, age stereotypes may be detrimental to the physical and mental health of older adults. Being discriminated by society on their physical functioning ability can lead to a reduction in their confidence level and hence, making them unable to perform activities physically due to this emotional barrier. However, when used appropriately, it may exert a positive psychological effect on them. It can feature as a boost in their performance level, enabling them to feel good about themselves and their abilities. There are certain ways to promote healthy living and physical functioning of older adults. The blurring the intergroup boundaries by finding possible similarities

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between the two groups could reduce stereotypic threats. This can help to bolster the older adults by causing them to receive lesser to none of such threats. The reframing of the threat can also aid the older adults in thinking good about themselves.

When they believe in themselves, they will tend to perform better than expected and eventually, this can be prove to show that older adults in general are not worthless or immobile.

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