

A comparative study of the influence of gender, age



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The double standard of ageing is a phenomenon that was defined by Sontag (1979), where the signs of ageing in women are less attractive than in men. In order to explore whether attitudes to ageing have remained stable and concurrent with previous research, a sample of 80 people, aged 17 to 63 completed a short survey. A questionnaire provided data on the participants' actual age, preferred age and age they believe they look; their gender and marital status; and their perceptions of the attractiveness of signs of ageing. The participants rated a list of aged features in both females and males. Hypotheses referring to marital status, age and gender were investigated with respect to their relationship with attitudes towards ageing. As predicted, males and females, both single and married, demonstrated attitudes that conformed to the double standard of ageing. Elderly people form a stigmatized group in today's society, and consequently, being classified as 'old' is unfavourable. Elderly people are often viewed as distinct societal subgroups (Jelenic and Stffens, 2002).

The study of people's attitudes towards ageing and the elderly has been existent for more than four decades. Attitudes are subject to change as culture develops and society modernizes. Carney (1997) states that " social values about ageing are changeable and often ambivalent" (pp. 249). Negative beliefs surrounding ageing people tend to result in people preferring to be younger than they are and believing that they look so too. Such beliefs have lead to the hypothesis that actual age is higher than the age people would choose to look and believe they look (1).

As noted by Kogan and Mills (1992), Sontag (1979) held the premise that women are judged more negatively on their physical appearance than are men. Signs of ageing such as grey hair, wrinkles and changed body shape in women are thought to devalue a woman's attractiveness. Conversely, the same characteristics in a man are presumed neutral, if not attractive, and are " indicators of maturity and power" (Kogan and Mills, 1992, pp 99). It is therefore believed that men become more attractive, whilst women become less attractive as they grow older (Giesen, 1989).

Henceforth, there exists a " double standard of ageing" - that the signs of ageing recognisable in women are viewed more negatively than those in men. It is therefore hypothesized that the percentage of people who give " high" ratings of unattractiveness to females will be larger than the percentage that gives " high" ratings of unattractiveness to males (2). Within this double standard exist two variables affecting one's attitude towards ageing; gender-of-target and gender-of-subject.

Kogan and Mills (1992) discussed the first study which explored the effects of gender on attitudes towards ageing undertaken by Laurence in 1964. The investigation revealed harsher responses when men rated women rather than men rating men or women rating women. On the other hand, women did not rate men any more harshly than their own gender. The implications of this double standard of ageing bear directly upon women's self-esteem (Giesen, 1989) thus impacting views of their own attractiveness and influencing their evaluations of women for the worse.

Predictions thus follow that the percentage of females who rate females as unattractive will be greater than the percentage that rate males as unattractive (3). In Harris' study (1994), " males were expected to be particularly critical of the signs of ageing, especially when evaluating them for female targets" (pp 150). Kogan and Mills (1992) cited Buss (1989) who reported that men uniformly expressed a preference for spouses younger than themselves. It is therefore hypothesized that the percentage of males who give " high" ratings of unattractiveness to females will be larger than the percentage that give " high" ratings to males (4).

Geisen (1989) suggests that one's marital status has an impact on one's perceptions of the attractiveness of ageing. It is hypothesized that married people who give " high" ratings to females will be larger than the percentage of married people who give " high" ratings to males (5). Findings from Geisen's study showed that more single than married women evaluated themselves as having grown more attractive over time. In addition, married women judged the peak years of women's attractiveness as occurring at a younger age than the age that single women perceived the peak years to be.

All women estimated that the peak years of attractiveness in men occurred from their early forties to late fifties. Such evidence suggests that married women are more inclined to judge ageing negatively, thus providing a basis for the hypothesis that the percentage of married women who give " high" unattractive ratings to females will be larger than the percentage of married women who give " high" ratings to males (6). The view that the prime years of attractiveness in men occur later in life than women (Geisen, 1989)

suggests that ageing men are more attractive than ageing women.

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This belief provides justification for the hypothesis that the percentage of married men who give "high" unattractive ratings to females will be larger than the percentage of married men who give "high" ratings to males (7).

Participants The sample for this study was composed of 80 people ranging in age from 17 to 63. The participants included first year psychology students at Adelaide University and their friends, relatives and acquaintances - half of whom were married and the other half, single. Of the 80 people, 40 were male and 40, female.

Apparatus/Materials

A questionnaire entitled "Attitudes to Ageing Questionnaire" (see Appendix A) was a 2 page survey composed of eight sections. Preliminary questions referred to the age, gender and marital status of the participant, how old they think they looked and what age they would chose to be. The final part of the survey required the participant to rate how attractive he/she found a list of seven features in a woman and then in a man. Seven boxes were placed under a scale ranging from very attractive, to neutral, through to very unattractive for each of the seven features.

Such features included grey hair, balding, wrinkles and changed body shape. A consent form explaining the terms and conditions of the study was provided.

Procedure The participants were approached by one of the Adelaide University Psychology I students and asked if they were willing to complete an 'Attitudes to Ageing' questionnaire. Having the study briefly explained to them, they were informed that their completed survey would be used as statistical data for the exploration of attitudes towards ageing.

As stated on the consent form (Appendix B), participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. They were assured that the information would be used for study purposes only and that the surveys would be destroyed at the culmination of the study. If participants were concerned about confidentiality, the questionnaire was placed in a sealed envelope. Participants were asked to be as honest as possible, ticking the appropriate boxes corresponding to the given scale in order to rate the attractiveness of the features listed.