

Research Article

The Language of Ageism: Why We Need to Use Words Carefully

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Abstract

Purpose: Language carries and conveys meaning which feeds assumptions and judgments that can lead to the development of stereotypes and discrimination. As a result, this study closely examined the specific language that is used to communicate attitudes and perceptions of aging and older adults.

Design and Methods: We conducted a qualitative study of a twitter assignment for 236 students participating in a senior mentoring program. Three hundred fifty-four tweets were qualitatively analyzed to explore language-based age discrimination using a thematic analytic approach.

Results: Twelve percent of the tweets ($n = 43$) were found to contain discriminatory language. Thematic analysis of the biased tweets identified 8 broad themes describing language-based age discrimination: assumptions and judgments, older people as different, uncharacteristic characteristics, old as negative, young as positive, infantilization, internalized ageism, and internalized microaggression.

Implications: The language of ageism is rooted in both explicit actions and implicit attitudes which make it highly complex and difficult to identify. Continued examination of linguistic encoding is needed in order to recognize and rectify language-based age discrimination.

Key words: Ageism, Microaggression, Communication and language-based discrimination, Linguistic encoding

The demographics are clear; there will be more older people in the world than at any other time in human history, and we are just at the beginning of this remarkable trend. Yet negative attitudes, stereotypes, judgments, and assumptions regarding older people abound. In fact, ageism, in the form of pervasive negative attitudes about older persons, is widely accepted and normative for most cultures (Boduroglu, Yoon, Luo, & Park, 2006; Ng, 2002). Evidence of ageism can be found on a macro

level (e.g., antiaging beauty campaigns) as well as on a micro-level (e.g., everyday language incorporating subtle expressions of contempt and derogatory remarks about aging and older people). The term “antiaging,” in and of itself, illustrates that political correctness is not afforded to older adults, as it is with many other marginalized groups (Levy & Banaji, 2002).

Ageism, or discrimination based on age, is extraordinarily complex and is often covert. In fact, many ageist sentiments are

very subtle in nature, and are often missed or overlooked. To add to the confusion, ageist remarks may be well-intentioned. For example, an ageist remark can appear on the surface as a compliment (e.g., addressing an older woman as “young lady”) when in fact they subtly perpetuate the idea that “old” is bad. Using the word “old” to indicate something that is considered bad implicitly perpetuates ageism through negative images and stereotypes of older people (Palmore, 2000); just as using the word “young” to describe things that are good.

There is an abundance of research describing the phenomenon of discriminatory linguistic encoding in areas such as racism and sexism (e.g., Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Weatherall, 2002). The following quote from Ng (2007) best illustrates why this subtle language-based discrimination is so destructive: “A ‘dialect’ with an army behind it becomes the ‘language’ and the accent flowing from the mouths of royals and their pretenders becomes ‘standard’.” In other words, language encodes discriminatory stereotypes and scripts that are associated with inequalities and assist to normalize discrimination in everyday life (Ng, 2007). According to Ng (2007) language is power; and discrimination cannot be alleviated nor fully understood without language.

The language of ageism is complex and can range from a communicated belief that is intended as explicitly positive to a verbal indignity, whether intentional or unintentional that communicates hostility or insults. The person responsible for communicating the language bias may be unaware that they are engaging in a negative form of communication. As well, the person receiving the message may also be unaware of the bias being communicated. Most troubling, however, is that these language-based discriminatory patterns are normalized and potentially internalized.

Gerontophobia, or fear of aging, and aging anxiety are perpetuated by ageist stereotypes that lead us to fear our own aging. Research literature clearly points to negative health outcomes among elders who experience and internalize ageism (Bryant et al., 2012; Levy, 2009; Mock & Eibach, 2011). Levy (2009) uses age stereotype embodiment theory to describe the process by which age stereotypes influence the individual over their lifespan. Age stereotype embodiment theory proposes that stereotypes are assimilated from the surrounding culture, including popular culture, norms, and everyday interactions (Levy, 2009). According to Levy (2009) age stereotypes operate from society to the individual as well as within the individual over time (child to elder). Examples of these stereotypes abound in popular culture including the birthday card image of an older adult in a diaper, a joke about the normality of memory loss and aging (i.e., a senior moment), and the commercial poking fun at older adults engaging in sexual behavior. Theorists have suggested that social categorization as a result of stereotyping results in inevitable prejudice (Ehrlich, 1973; Tajfel, 1981).

Externalized and Internalized Ageism

Social categorization is used as a mechanism to help us organize the complex world in which we live. We categorize people as having similar characteristics to ourselves as part of our own group (ingroup) or as different from those who constitute our group (outgroup). This binary ingroup/outgroup opposition is the basic form of human cognition and the most typical way to represent group differences (Levi-Strauss, 1967). An abundance of literature is available that provides evidence on the universal applicability of ingroup/outgroup opposition among different social categories, including race, political affiliation, and age (e.g., Falk, Spunt, & Lieberman, 2012; Ratner, Dotsch, Wigboldus, van Knippenberg, & Amodio, 2014; Wiese, 2012). According to the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) stereotypes include two dimensions: warmth and competence. The stereotype of older adults has been categorized as an ambivalent stereotype consisting of older people as warm, but incompetent (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005). According to SCM, social groups that do not compete with the ingroup are perceived as warm. To the contrary, social groups that are not high in status (e.g., economically) are considered incompetent. This is illustrated by the phrase “doddering, but dear” as an apt definition of older adults based on the SCM (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002).

In general, people exhibit a tendency to show preference to members of their own groups and to discriminate against members of other groups. This is illustrated by the concept of social distance. Social distance was described by Bogardus (1928) as a mechanism to measure prejudice. According to Bogardus (1928), social distance represents the distinction between one’s own and others’ group identities. The concept of social distance has since been expanded to include the difference between the self and other and unfamiliarity with others (Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2011). When younger people, paradoxically, discriminate against their future selves, we see a unique form of discrimination (Jönson, 2013). With ageism we are perpetuating a discriminatory pattern in which the perpetrator (ingroup) will transition to the victimized category (outgroup) (Jönson, 2013). According to the internal working model concept, which represents the cornerstone of attachment theory, mental representations of self and others carry forward and influence thought, feeling and behavior in our adulthood relationships (Bowlby, 1979; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). After a lifetime of exposure, ageist stereotypes become part of our internal working model. These stereotypes become directed inward and outside of our awareness, thus creating internalized ageism (Levy, 2001; Levy & Banaji, 2002).

Internalized ageism is a form of ingroup discrimination in which older adults marginalize and discriminate

against other older people. Internalized ageism can manifest in a number of ways including denying commonality with others within your own group (e.g., an older adult who does not want to be associated with “all of those old people,” an older adult who isolates for fear of being “othered,” an older adult going to extreme measures to look younger). Research has well-established that internalized ageism is associated with negative health outcomes including: lower life expectancy, high blood pressure, reduced self-esteem, reduced risk taking and motivation (Coudin & Alexopoulos, 2010; Cruikshank, 2003; Levy, Hausdorff, Hencke, & Wei, 2000; Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002).

How we construct our identity, specifically the construction of age identity, is formed in part by social processes such as face-to-face interaction that is interpreted from a sociolinguistic perspective (Ylänne-McEwen, 1999). It is, therefore, essential to closely examine the specific language used to communicate attitudes and perceptions of aging and older adults. A careful examination will assist us in better understanding the nature of language-based age discrimination in order to understand what may be considered harmful and what corrective action is necessary to reduce bias.

The Bias Continuum

Bias represents a prejudice; a preconceived opinion about someone or something. Stereotyping is a form of bias that represents the application of an individual's own thoughts, beliefs, and expectations onto other individuals without first obtaining factual knowledge about the individual (Fiske, 2010). Discrimination is the application of beliefs that are based on prejudices and stereotype (Fiske, 2010). Bias is a negative evaluation of one group in relation to another group and can be expressed both explicitly and implicitly.

Explicit bias requires that a person has awareness of their judgments as well as the corresponding belief that their evaluation is correct in some manner (Devine, 1989). Implicit or unconscious bias represents social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside of their own conscious awareness (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Valian, 1998). Implicit bias can act as a barrier to inclusion and can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices. Our subtle, unconscious judgments of others can result in behaviors that promote separateness, such as not speaking directly to an individual or not making eye contact. Implicit biases are learned behaviors that are modeled by others including family, peers and the media. They affect our opinions of groups of people. Research suggests that implicit bias is common and pervasive (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). In contrast, explicit bias is

generally considered unacceptable. Implicit bias is hidden and unintentional. It can be unknowingly activated and transmitted without a person's intent or awareness, making it very difficult to both measure and control (Blair, Steiner, & Havranek, 2011; Devine, 1989).

There is a need for more research focused specifically on the language associated with implicit ageism. This is particularly true with regard to ambivalent ageism described within the SCM (i.e., older people as warm but incompetent; Cuddy et al., 2005). Kemper (1994) was the first to use the work “elderspeak” to describe a speech style that implicitly questions the competence of older adults. Elderspeak not only represents patronizing language but also a style of speech that has a slower rate, exaggerated intonation, elevated pitch and simpler vocabulary than normal adult speech (Caporael, 1981). Recognizing implicit language bias is essential to the examination of discriminatory linguistic encoding because communication of implicit bias is less susceptible to social desirability and people are often unable to identify the bias by typical means of introspection. As one example, Bonnesen and Burgess (2003) examined the use of the phrase “senior moment” in newspapers. They found that the language increased in popularity and became relatively normalized in American culture. Because implicit bias cannot be captured with self-assessment measures, sophisticated instruments such as the implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) and masked evaluative priming tasks have been developed to measure the strength of these automatic associations. These measures are, however, unable to capture how the language of implicit bias is communicated and perpetuated.

The term microaggression is used to capture “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 237). The term microaggression was coined by Chester Pierce in 1970 based on his work with African Americans. Pierce described a microaggression as a cumulative miniassault. It is subtle, stunning, and often automatic (Pierce, 1974).

Recently, the literature has blossomed with definitions, commentary and research about microaggression. The term microaggression has been expanded to include broader social disparities in society such as sexism and heterosexism. However, ageism in relation to microaggression is glaringly absent. The Wikipedia definition of microaggression theory describes it as based on race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Wikipedia, n.d.). In the scholarly literature, a quick search of three academic search engines (PsycInfo, Ebscohost, and JSTOR; January 2015) yields 302 entries collectively with the keyword “microaggression” and only 1 of the 302 articles is related to age. Furthermore, the one

article that does reference age is not specifically related to aging. Rather, it focuses on microaggression associated with stigmatized medical conditions such as urinary incontinence (Heintz, DeMucha, Deguaman, & Softa, 2013).

Language-based age discrimination in the forms of implicit bias and microaggression is difficult to identify due to cultural acceptability, lack of operational definitions regarding age bias language, and lack of appropriate measurement tools. In fact, age bias is so complex that there is lack of clarity, even among gerontological scholars, on what language constitutes bias based on age. In this article, we examine how a social media assignment, specifically tweeting, was used to capture language-based discrimination.

Capturing Language-Based Discrimination Through a Social Media Assignment

Twitter is a popular social networking site that uses microblogging to enable users to communicate through the exchange of succinct, virtual messages. Since its inception in October, 2006, Twitter has grown exponentially. Over 500 million tweets were sent per day as of 2014 (About Twitter, Inc., n.d.). Microblogging is a form of communication in which users post brief messages (“tweets”) on a range of everyday topics. Tweets are micromessages up to 140 characters in length and are identified by a “hash” symbol (#). A hashtag is a keyword or phrase that describes a tweet and is what Twitter uses to organize information, make it accessible and assist people searching for topics and keywords.

The social manifestation of twitter, known as “tweeting” has been explored in the literature as a viable educational tool that can: connect classroom to community, explore collaborative writing, engage in reader response, promote collaboration across schools, as a viable platform for metacognition, and as a tool for assessing opinion and examining consensus (Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2010). As a result, social media assignments such as tweeting and blogging were used as educational tools for students participating in a senior mentoring program.

Methods

Procedure

The senior mentoring program was designed to provide health professional students (medical, pharmacy, and nursing) with an understanding of gerontology and the multidimensional care of older adults. The program partnered teams of students (2–3 students per team) with an older adult living in the community. The goals of the program were increasing knowledge, improving attitudes, and

exposing students to different professional perspectives on aging and working with older adults. In order to assess efficacy of the senior mentoring program, students complete an online pretest and post-test survey that includes measures to evaluate whether students experience a change in attitudes about aging and older adults over the course of the program. Students also complete group and individual assignments after each visit with their mentor. Each team of students was required to participate in a group blog that reflected specifically on the interprofessional learning gained from their experience with their team and mentor. Group blogs were only accessible to the course instructors. Individually, students were required to create their own tweet after each team mentor visit. The tweets were posted on a learning management system (i.e., Blackboard) where they could be viewed by all course participants and instructors. In addition, students were given the option to publicly post their tweets on their own Twitter accounts. The instructions for the Twitter assignment were as follows: “create a tweet that represented the learning you gained from your interview with your mentor.” Given that the tweeting assignment was designed to highlight positive aspects of learning from visits with an older adult mentor, the tweets presented an opportunity to examine subtle language-based discrimination that captured age bias.

Study Participants

Two hundred and thirty-six students participated in the senior mentoring program. Ninety-one percent ($n = 215$) were first-year medical students. Six percent ($n = 15$) were undergraduate nursing students. Three percent ($n = 6$) were pharmacy students. The mean age of the participants was 24.3 (range 19–41). Slightly over half of the participants (56%) were women. Fifty-one percent ($n = 129$) were White. Twenty-three ($n = 58$) were Asian. Four percent ($n = 11$) were Black and Hispanic. The remaining 18% were unknown.

Data Processing and Analysis

Three hundred fifty-four tweets completed by the end of the first semester of the senior mentoring program were included in the final analysis. The 354 tweets consisted of responses from the 236 participating students as follows: 191 individual tweets from students that completed the first assignment on the topic of functionality and 163 individual tweets from students that completed the second assignment regarding the topic of health.

Qualitative analysis was undertaken using a thematic analysis approach that consisted of coding and labeling

the tweets (Boyatzis, 1998). Tweets were deidentified and provided to the research team, which consisted of three gerontologists (two of which are also developmental psychologists).

In our initial analysis, the first author conducted open coding in order to identify, categorize and describe the phenomena found in the tweets. The three coders then independently analyzed and labeled codes with the same content and meaning. Both inductive and deductive thinking was used during this phase of analysis to identify the presence or absence of language-based age discrimination. Inter-rater reliability was evaluated during this initial stage of coding and was found to be moderate to good between the pairs of raters ($\kappa = .42-.66$), and among the three raters (Krippendorff's Alpha = .59).

The three researchers then met to reconcile differences using a consensus approach to resolve discrepancies and validate the coding (Larsson, 1993). As one example, the researchers discussed whether the common phrases "a young spirit" or "feeling young" contain language-based age discrimination. Consensus determined that if the word (e.g., young or old) represented the default of what is "good," or conversely what is "bad" then it was considered language-based discrimination. One method used to make this determination was language substitution. For example, the researchers tried to identify neutral terms or words that could be substituted that capture the essence of young that would not convey bias. As another example of language substitution, the research team tried substituting a specific gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation for the word old to gather a greater sense as to whether or not the words portrayed bias.

After interpretation reconciliation (Crabtree & Miller, 1999), each team member individually recoded the tweets to identify the presence or absence of language-based age discrimination and inter-rater agreement improved significantly between the pairs of raters ($\kappa = .88-.91$), and among the three raters (Krippendorff's Alpha = .91). Twelve percent ($N = 43$) of the 354 tweets had 100% inter-rater agreement for containing a form of bias through language-based discrimination.

Next, through selective coding of the 43 tweets, thematic analysis was undertaken to develop themes, concepts, and categories. Finally, patterns were analyzed linking the core categories and themes. Given that one tweet often communicated multiple themes; the analytical process was repeated until consensus was determined. Once theoretical saturation was achieved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) an integrative diagram was established to describe the data with respect to its emerging theory. This integrative work was done in a group session with all of the research team members.

Findings

Eight broad themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the tweets. These themes are as follows: assumptions and judgments, older people as different, uncharacteristic characteristics, old as negative, young as positive, infantilization, internalized ageism, and internalized microaggression. Table 1 presents a description of each theme along with their definitions and incidences.

Assumptions and Judgments

The overarching theme identified through thematic analysis represented a form of an assumption or judgment about older people. Assumptions and judgments emerged in two different manners. They emerged as a representation of the student's thinking about aging and older adults as well as a representation of the students interpretation of the older adult's thinking about their own aging and older people in general. The representation of the student's interpretation of the older adult's thinking was identified by the researchers as language that communicated that the sentiment was coming directly from the older adult mentor. This was sometimes illustrated by, one, the use of quotes or explicit language stating it was a direct quote from the mentor or, two, the authors identifying a referential indication such as age (e.g., There is still so much to learn, even at my age! #alwaymoretolearn). Analysis indicated that assumptions and judgments led to two distinct pathways; one in which older people were viewed as inherently different by the students (Pathway 1), and the other representing the older adults' internalization of negative assumptions and judgments about aging and being older (Pathway 2).

Pathway 1

Older people as different

Overarching assumptions and judgments about older people contributed to the idea that older people were inherently different than other people. This was communicated via an "us versus them" mentality in which older adults were categorized as different from oneself or different from people within the student's own age group. Examples include the following:

They are almost four times my age and living lives full of learning, activism, and purpose. They make aging look easy! My mentors made me realize the importance of treating the elderly with the same attitude and approach as for treating younger patients.

Viewing older people as inherently different lead to a number of different generalities that were thematically identified as separate and distinct phenomena. These themes

Table 1. Themes, Definitions, and Incidences

Theme	Definition	Tweets
Assumptions/ judgments	Generalizations about older people based on assumptions and judgments	Growing older is seen as a privilege by some adults. Although older adults lost the capability of performing ADLs, they still appreciate their independence and try to live their lives to the fullest. Older patients don't have many opportunities for touch, so give hugs!
Older people as different	Characterizes older people are thought of as different from other people	..made me realize the importance of treating the elderly with the same attitude and approach as treating younger patients. Treat elderly people as normal people, no different!
Uncharacteristic characteristics	Characterizes certain behaviors are unusual or outside the norm for an older person	94 years old and still sharp as a tack! "Honey, you take Plavix!" I wish when I grow old I can still be as fashionable and full of life as my mentor is! My mentor is a truly amazing woman. She maintains great health and keeps a daily activity that very few people at her age are able to accomplish.
"Old" as a negative	Describes "old" as bad or a negative place or state	My mentor, a 71 year old grandma proves that age is just a number! Just had an intriguing convo with a new friend, who just happens to be 80 years young. ..the youngest senior I've ever met #fullofenergy #independent Orange is the new black, 90 is the new 17! #goodhumorneverages It's all about attitude. Her infectiously positive outlook is what keeps her looking younger every day. Our mentor was 92 but didn't look a day over 70 and was still just a kid at heart. A seasoned troublemaker with a young heart of gold. What a sweet woman! I especially love her little winks #herecomestrouble Best quote from our mentor..."We got married because we could never finish an argument, and we still haven't" A truly adorable and inspiring couple! "There is still so much to learn, even at my age!" #alwaymoretolearn 76 years old and when asked if she considers herself to be old she says "Nope!" and then continues to refer to the other residents as "old people" #76andnotold
"Young" as a positive	Describes looking and acting "young" as a positive attribute	Straight from mentor—"Hang in there. We need people who are interested in someone older than themselves. I do not say the elderly, for that's a naughty word. O-L-D and F-A-T are worse than four letter words." "We don't think of ourselves as old...our mind says we are teenagers, but our body just slows us down" #onlyasoldasyoufeel Advice on how to keep your practice running smoothly, "Be good listeners but don't let seniors talk for too long!"
Infantilizing	Expresses childlike attributes	
Internalized ageism	Described ingroup discrimination in which the older adults were making judgments, assumptions or denying commonality with other group members	
Internalized microaggression	Described ingroup discrimination that communicated hostility, derogatory, or negative slights and insults	

included uncharacteristic characteristics, old as a negative state, and conversely young as a positive state.

Uncharacteristic characteristics

This theme described the idea that certain actions and behaviors are unusual, or outside of the norm, for older people. This included references to activities and mindsets that society categorizes as appropriate for younger individuals. Therefore, the language of the tweet communicated

surprise that an older adult was participating in an activity or way of thinking that was not expected for someone of that age. This is illustrated by the following:

She is the epitome of lifelong learning, she is STILL taking online college classes.

My mentor proved that a positive outlook on life can affect your personal health by continually allowing you to find purpose and motivation even in old age.

A great bedside manner gives your patients hope.
 Automobile racing at age 83 keeps them young.
 Our mentor has such a free and young spirit. She still
 goes on dates, parties like a college kid, and dances with
 Elvis impersonators #youngandwildandfree.

Old as negative

In this theme the word “old” was used to portray an undesirable state. This theme included representations of the student’s use of “old” as undesirable as well as representations of the student’s interpretation of the older adult’s portrayal of “old” as bad.

Getting older doesn’t necessarily always make you old.

“I’m not old, I’m just more mature!” Positive thinking helps keep things in perspective.

Age is only a number, old is only when you can no longer do things for yourself.

Got to meet my wonderful mentor. “You’re not old until you can’t drive!” #foreverYOUNG

Young as positive

This theme was distinct from old as negative. Although there was overlap between the two, young as positive captured the specific sentiment that being, acting or looking younger was preferable to being, acting or looking older.

Our mentor is seriously the youngest “senior” I’ve ever met #fullofenergy #independent.

My senior mentor is younger than me #snowontheroofbutI’mnottooold.

Our mentor has such a free and young spirit. She still goes on dates, parties like a college kid, and dances with Elvis impersonators #youngandwildandfree.

Infantilizing

This theme represented the lexicon that expressed childlike attributes that deny maturity in age or experience. Words such as cute, little, and adorable were used to express attributes of an older adult.

What a sweet woman! I especially love her little winks #herecomestrouble.

Pathway 2

Pathway 2 specifically represents the students interpretation of the older adult’s thinking about their own aging and older people in general.

Internalized ageism

Internalized ageism captured ingroup discrimination about aging and older people. Examples of internalized bias included denying commonality with other group members or communicating ingroup generalizations and stereotypes as demonstrated by the following:

“Health is for the young, when you are our age you do the best you can”

“In a retirement home, it’s the other old people that are the problem! Hearing loss makes dinner time a loud experience”

Internalized microaggression

Internalized microaggression was separate and distinct from internalized ageism in that it communicated hostility, insults, and derogatory statements. There was significant overlap between ageism and microaggression, as all internalized microaggression tweets were also categorized as fitting internalized ageism.

“Sometimes our computer goes out to lunch”....my mentor on her brain slowing as she ages

“Listen, talk slowly, and brace yourself to deal with some stubborn people”—advice from our mentor on working with older patients.

Using these themes, we developed an integrative language-based age discrimination diagram that demonstrates possible pathways by which language-based discrimination is formed and communicated (Figure 1). This integrative diagram reflects a combination of understanding previously presented by multiple researchers (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2005; Fiske et al., 2002; Levy, 2009), guided by the current analysis and arranged in a manner we find conceptually coherent. The authors endeavored to ensure that as many pieces of the integrative diagram as possible are grounded in theory, rather than mainly embodying speculative notions. This could not, however, be exhaustively completed.

The concepts outlined in Pathway 1 (i.e., assumptions and judgments, older people as different, uncharacteristic characteristics, older as negative and young as positive, and infantilizing) is supported by the SCM. This paradigm highlights the ambivalence inherent in age stereotypes and the complexity involved with the stereotype of older people as “doddering, but dear” (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002). The concepts outlined in Pathway 2 (i.e., older people as different, uncharacteristic characteristics, older as negative and young as positive) are postulated to be connected to internalized ageism and internalized microaggression, as supported by stereotype embodiment theory (Levy, 2009). This notion is also supported by the internal working models’ concept within attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979).

Discussion

The integrative language-based age discrimination diagram presents a visual diagram thematically representing how the students expressed language-based age discrimination. This integrative diagram is intended to serve as an architectural

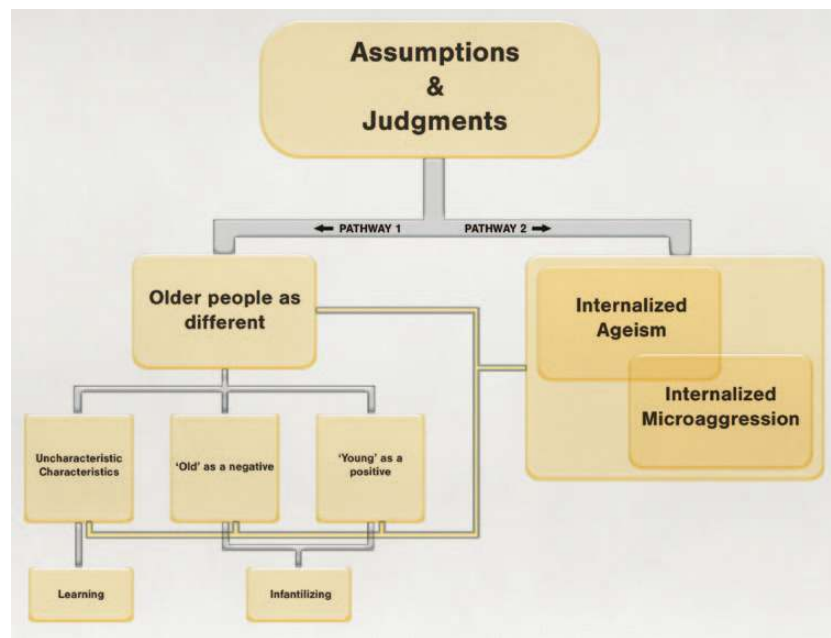


Figure 1. Integrative language-based age discrimination diagram: formation and perpetuation.

outline for the phenomenon of language-based age discrimination more broadly. Within the diagram, the authors are not suggesting directionality but rather connectivity.

The diagram demonstrates two pathways that provide insight into the processes by which sentiments about older adults were expressed through words. The overarching theme of both pathways was the expression of an assumption or judgment. To assume something is to conclude something prior to consideration of evidence. In contrast, to judge something is to conclude based on evidence. The assumptions and judgments expressed in the tweets lead to the linguistic expression of two pathways; older people as different or internalized ageism.

In Pathway 1 the assumption or judgment was an antecedent to viewing older people as essentially different. Viewing older people as inherently different is demonstrative of one's internal working model through representations of self and others. A representation of self and other was communicated by expressions of "old" as negative and "young as positive, or by an uncharacteristic characteristic (e.g., an older adult doing something outside of the expected norm). The tweets that communicated an uncharacteristic characteristic sometimes appeared to challenge the student's internal working model. This was indicated by the expression of surprise or delight that their initial assumption or judgment was challenged (e.g., they are almost four times my age and living lives full of learning, activism, and purpose. They make aging look easy!). The surprise communicated by the student could potentially be used as an opportunity for learning and reflection. By encountering an older adult that acts or appears outside the student's anticipated norm, the students could expand their

view of aging to incorporate a less generalized view of older adults. On the other hand, an uncharacteristic characteristic may not upend an established negative stereotype but rather may produce a counterproductive response in which the implicit bias is reinforced. Gerontological educators can, therefore, utilize this knowledge to create meaningful learning experiences for students that go beyond increasing our scholarly knowledge about aging to challenge our underlying and possibly hidden assumptions about older adults and aging. The result is an opportunity to reframe our internal working model. Further research is needed to identify if the new learning gained could start to change our assumptions and judgments, or could lead to more neutral assumptions about older adults that are less generalized.

In Pathway 2, the assumption or judgment was an antecedent to the expression of internalized ageism or microaggression. After a lifetime of exposure to ageist language, negative attitudes and thoughts about aging can become directed inward. This perpetuates the internalization of ageism and internalized microaggression. Using the social distance model (Bogardus, 1928) and stereotype embodiment theory (Levy, 2009) as frameworks, we postulate that the continuous expression of ageism through subtle language (e.g., old as bad or young as good) can be part of a lifelong process of external and internal "othering" that can contribute to negative health outcomes or social isolation.

The way that we use language is extremely important given that the lexicon conveys levels of meaning that embed far deeper than the words themselves. Language is the basis through which we communicate with each other. Through language we share our thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Words are often used automatically and unconsciously as

we speak from habit, convenience, and social acceptability. With regard to aging and older adults, certain words and phrases, although intended as benign or even positive, may inadvertently perpetuate negative attitudes, stereotypes, judgments, and assumptions. For example, the direct use of the term “young” to indicate an older adult who is in some way energetic is likely not intended as derogatory. In fact, it is likely intended as the opposite. Paradoxically, the message conveyed suggests that being or acting “young” is positive because being or acting “old” is not. It is possible that this use of language occurs by default, with the terms “old” and “young” being used because there are no ready alternatives in common parlance or because it is effectively a type of shorthand that everyone will understand. For instance, people will probably readily recognize and respond to the phrase “youthful spirit” to indicate someone who is engaged in life and with the world. This could alternatively be described as someone with a “vital spirit” or “engaged spirit” but these words and phrases are not currently part of our day-to-day discourse when discussing aging and older adults.

Acknowledgment of these pathways and the use of discriminatory language-based on age represent the first step in a larger attempt to disrupt the social standard. Gerontologists and gerontological scholars can follow in the footsteps of those who have advocated for corrective action with regard to language bias for minority groups. For example, two separate committees within the American Psychological Association considered the issues of bias in language nearly 30 years ago. The Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns developed a guideline for avoiding heterosexual language bias and the Publications and Communications committee of the Board of Ethnic Minority Affairs developed a document titled “Guidelines of Avoiding Racial/Ethnic Bias (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Both documents shed light on the problems associated with ambiguous language which has the potential to promote or reinforce negative stereotypes. Efforts such as Dahmen & Cozma’s (2009) Media takes: On aging guide for appropriate aging language for journalism, media, and entertainment represents an important step in the process of disrupting ageist language. We believe it’s now time for gerontologists and gerontological scholars to expand on this work by shedding light on the unambiguous nature of age-based language discrimination in order to challenge the status quo.

Notwithstanding limitations in research design and solely utilizing a sample of college students, our study has clearly identified that language based-age discrimination is both present and socially acceptable, but not easily identifiable at first glance. It is noteworthy that although only 12% of the tweets contained language-based discrimination these messages were created by students with the intent of conveying positive messages about the learning gained from their interactions with

their senior mentors. This demonstrates that ageist language is so engrained in our day-to-day world that it is nearly invisible. Perhaps the implications of this study are best summed up by the poet Lord Byron (1788–1824):

But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.

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