St. Catherine University

SOPHIA

5-2012

A Perspective of Aging from the Prose of Age Specific Birthday Cards

Lori Halbur
St. Catherine University

Recommended Citation

A Perspective of Aging from the Prose of Age Specific Birthday Cards

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Submitted by Lori Halbur

May 4, 2012

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

Committee Members:

Colin Hollidge, Ph.D. (Chair)

Jay Anderson, Ph.D.

Annette Licht, MSW, LGSW

Abstract

With a growing number of older people in the United States, it is important for social workers to acknowledge that ageism exists in our society and continue to research, study and understand the influences that contribute to it. Media outlets are one source that has been found to have an influence on people's perceptions about older adults. A qualitative study was carried out to determine if the messages in age specific greeting cards that are produced specifically for individuals age 60 and older portray more positive or negative perceptions about aging or older individuals. The non-probability, convenience sample for this study included 83 greeting cards. Using Grounded Theory Method, the data from the prose of the cards was coded and major themes emerged. It was found that the messages presented in the greeting cards displayed many forms of ageism both positive and negative in nature. Future research on the messages presented in different forms of media and how it relates to ageism will be helpful in increasing social workers' knowledge so that they will be prepared to assist older adults and their families with greater success through the end years of older adults' lives.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and extend my heartfelt gratitude to the following people who have

made the completion of this Research Project possible: St. Catherine University and University

of St. Thomas for hosting this research; my Committee Chair, Colin Hollidge, of the MSW

Social Work Program for his guidance and expertise throughout the process; my committee

members, Jay Anderson and Annette Licht, for their participation, feedback and encouragement

through the multiple stages of the project; my family and friends, who have given me

encouragement and loving support along the way; and lastly, my Grandma, who has enriched my

life and given me a passion for older adults.

Table of Contents

A Perspective of Aging from the Prose of Age Specific Birthday Cards

According to the 2010 United States Census Bureau, 13% of the population in the United States is age 65 and older and is projected to reach 16.1% in 2020 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). This aging trend will continue until 2050 when those who are age 65 and older will account for 20.2% of the total population (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). In the United States, there will be a swell of older adults popping up in every aspect of life and becoming more visible in every community. With this growing number of older people, it is important for social workers to acknowledge that ageism exists in our society and continue to research, study and understand the influences that contribute to it.

Ageism, according to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary (2011), is a "prejudice or discrimination against a particular age-group and especially the elderly." Furthermore, with ageism, consistent with the injustice of other well known ism's, older adults are treated differently or unequally based on negative stereotypes about aging and older adults (Katz, 2001; "Ageism-Stereotypes", 2011).   Studies have found some of the negative stereotypes of older individuals to be: withdrawn, isolated, unattractive, a burden, lonely, unproductive, dependent on others, inflexible, dull, uncooperative, unhealthy, useless, poor, depressed, and inactive (Minichiello, Browne & Kendig, 2000; Palmore, Branch, and Harris, 2005d; Ron, 2007; Woolf, 1998).   Research has indicated that the negative stereotypes that are derived from ageism may have a adverse effect on how older adults see themselves and their peers thus limiting their potential (Minichiello et al., 2000; Ron, 2007; Woolf, 1998) and even shortening their life expectancy (Levy, Slade, Kunkel & Kasl, 2002). In a study related to that, Ron (2007) found that the more that older adults described themselves to be in poor health, the more negative their attitude was about aging and old age.

There are a number of influences in our society that contribute to negative stereotypes about older adults that may fuel ageism. Some of the contributors include family (Roberts, 2002; Ron, 2007), lack of education (Angiullo, Whitbourne & Powers, 1996; Cottle & Glover, 2007; Heycox and Hughes, 2006; Roberts, 2002; Ron, 2007), previous experience or prior relationships with older individuals (Hawkins, 1996; Heycox & Hughes, 2006), and the media (Aday & Austin, 2000; Roberts, 2002).

Additionally, further research has shown that images portrayed by mass media influence how people young and old not only conceptualize aging and old age, but also how they react to aging and old age (Dahmen & Cozma, 2009). Unfortunately, much of the research in this area has shown that mass media outlets such as television, movies, advertising, jokes, music, and greeting cards tend to project negative stereotypes about aging and older adults (Bowd, 2003; Dahmen & Cozma, 2009; Palmore et al., 2005b; Signorelli, 2004).

We live in a youth oriented society where younger adults are perceived more positively and valued more highly than older adults (Woolf, 1998), but even with that, there are some positive traits that have historically been associated with older adults. One of these is that older adults are wise, a concept which has been referred to as sageism (Minnichiello et al., 2000). Incidentally, with the baby boomer generation zeroing in on what is considered to be old age, Katz (2001) presented a change that is being seen in how the media, advertising and public consciousness is presenting and seeing images of aging and older adults in the media, which is being referred to as positive aging. With that, even sageism is being downplayed to make room for these new images of aging that conjure up new positive attributes for aging and older individuals such as being active and healthy, having autonomy and mobility, and wanting and being able to make choices (Katz, 2001). Ellis and Morrison (2005) believe the baby boomer

generation may also be able to have an influence on greeting card companies in the future, demanding more positive cards, and with their growing numbers, baby boomers will be in the position to influence the card companies financially, by not purchasing negative ageist themed cards.

With the growing number of older individuals in the United States, it is necessary for social workers to have an understanding of ageism and its influences. The purpose of this study is to look at what greeting cards, a popular form of mass media used in American society, project about aging and older adults. This researcher will carry out an exploratory study of age specific birthday cards directed at recipients aged 60 and older and determine if the written messages are more positive, negative or neutral in nature so there can be further discernment into what this type of mass media projects about aging and older adults. The findings of this study will provide insight that will be useful for social workers in addressing the issue of ageism in our society.

Literature Review

Perceptions about Aging and Older Adults

There are many stereotypes associated with aging and old age. Some of the stereotypes are positive and some are negative. In either case, stereotypes associate specific traits to fit the pattern of all individuals that fit into a specific category (Palmore et al., 2005d). Because every individual's characteristics are so different, a stereotype will seldom hold true for an entire group of people (Palmore et al., 2005d). This paper will review both the positive and negative stereotypes associated with aging and older individuals. It will then look at what some of the influences are that develop society's attitudes about aging and older adults. Lastly, it will examine what past research has found regarding greeting cards' messages about aging and older adults.

Negative stereotypes lead to negative perceptions

Palmore has found that inaccurate ideas about aging most often reflect negative stereotypes (2005). When interviewing older adults about stereotypes, studies have found some of the negative stereotypes to be: withdrawn, isolated, unattractive, unhealthy, a burden, lonely, unproductive, dependent on others, and inactive (Minichiello et al., 2000; Ron, 2007).

Declining appearance of health and attractiveness receive much attention when looking at aging and older adults. Calasanti (2005) believes that there is a great emphasis on the theme of appearance of health and healthy bodies in our society and that there is a belief that people have control over their own health, so when people are, or appear to be, unhealthy, they are looked at negatively for having failed in this area. Furthermore, as people's bodies age, society equates that with the appearance of a decline in health, further reiterating a negative stereotype of aging

and old age (Calsanti, 2005). In relation to that, research completed by Ron (2007) has found the

more that older adults described themselves to be in poor health, the more negative their attitude

was about aging and old age, which reflects older individuals self perceptions in this area. More

emphasis of society's importance about physical characteristics was found in research that

questioned college students and identified that their definition of old was derived from physical

characteristics of the person (Cottle & Glover, 2007). Calasanti (2005) also believes this to be

true, but states that women are deemed to be determined older sooner than men based on the

physical characteristics such as sagging and wrinkling skin and graying hair. Even further,

Calasanti (2005) states these same characteristics on men may not only be seen as not negative,

but can even earn them greater status. The important standard that men need to meet to be

considered healthy Calasanti (2005) has found is having the ability to perform, in terms of being

able to be active. Older adults often strive for the appearance of health and physical beauty by

the standards of society as they age (Calasanti, 2005).

        Another important aspect about aging pertains to the perceptions society has about the

young-old versus the old-old. Multiple studies found that as older adults continue though the

aging process into their later years, the more negatively they are viewed (Hawkins, 1996;

Heycox & Hughes, 2006; Woolf, 1998). Hawkins respondents, who were undergraduate

students, mostly aged 18-24, evaluated older adults in three different age groups; the young-old,

old-old, and centenarians using the semantic differential scale (1996). Although the scores for

the categories went from 68.5% to 75.9% to 82.4% as the ages increased, all of the scores still

fell in the measurement scale's range for having a neutral attitude towards elderly persons

(Hawkins, 1996). Similar results came from Heycox and Hughes respondents who were 4th year

social work students with an average age of 23 (2006). On a scale that rated most positive

attitudes as 20 up to 140 for most negative, the group of older adults aged 65-74 received 64.5% whereas those aged 75+ received a score of 71.5 % (Heycox & Hughes, 2006).

How society perceives aging and older adults has an influence on how older adults perceive themselves (Minichiello et al., 2000; Ron, 2007; Woolf, 1998) thus, with negative stereotypes, older individuals may have a negative view about aging. Calasanti (2005) believes that older adults in American society try to avoid the aging process because the alternative is accepting old age which often times will cause older individuals to develop a lower self esteem because of society's ageist view on growing older.   One way that individuals try to avoid aging is through age denial (Palmore et al., 2005a). This is done by fibbing about one's age (Palmore et al., 2005a). Katz (2001), describes another avoidance technique as masking age which is done by referring to aging, not chronologically, but with a vague term such as "maturing".   Another technique being used by older Americans in staving off growing old is by lengthening middle age (Calasanti, 2005). So although it is acknowledged that you cannot avoid old age completely, with this avoidance tactic it will at least take longer to get there. There are even more aging avoidance techniques that are available to those who are financially sound. There are the warm weather communities that portray the life style of older people as active and free of problems (Katz, 2001). Palmore et al. also discuss techniques used to appear younger by "dying grey hair, getting face lifts and tummy tucks, attempting to minimize wrinkles with Botox" and any other number of procedures that can be completed by plastic surgeons (2005c).   There are also negative or dangerous ways of avoiding the reality of aging. Palmore et al. referred to past work they completed in this area that found older individuals may also avoid society's negative stereotypes on aging through "age segregation, isolation, alcoholism, substance abuse, mental illness or even suicide" (2005c, p. 262).

Positive stereotypes and a new way of aging

There are also positive attributes associated with aging. When interviewing older adults, researchers found some of the positive attributes they expressed were: motivated, busy, useful, supportive, content, active, and also being respected for their knowledge, experience and wisdom (Minichiello et al, 2000; Ron, 2007). Incidentally, in a mixed-design study, Ron (2007) found these positive stereotypes when he had college students in Haifa, Israel ask their grandparents to answer the question 'What does old age symbolize for you?' reflecting the answers first from the perspective of their youth, and then again from their present perspective. Ron (2007) found that 32% of the sample responded with negative stereotypes when they were young, but now have a positive attitude toward aging. In another study, this one qualitative, Minichiello et al. (2000) interviewed 18 older adults in Australia and came up with a recurring theme that was labeled 'sageism'. Sageism was described as "a positive form of ageism, the assumption that older people are wise or 'sages'" (Minichiello et al., 2000). The Minichiello et al. (2000) study also found that the respondents viewed aging and being old as two different things and attributed positive stereotypes to their aging perspective. Positive ageism can promote a positive self image in older adults, just as the aforementioned negative ageism can promote a negative self image (Minichiello et al., 2000).

In studies completed by Minichiello et al. (2000) out of Australia and Ron (2007) out of Israel, it has been found that there is a change occurring in the perceptions of older adults about aging and old age. Older adults are developing a new image of aging, positive aging, and showing it through remaining active both physically and intellectually, eating healthy, acting and thinking young, and maintaining strong support systems (Minichiello et al., 2000). Katz believes that positive aging is able to make older individuals feel empowered, which energizes them to

reinvent their roles in society for not only themselves, but also those who are following in future

generations (2001).

These new images of aging, which can promote positive perceptions about aging and

older adults in our society, can be viewed as progressive and well deserved but, another way of

interpreting these new images can be just as ageist as the negative stereotypes due to the fact that

not all older individuals fit into this positive stereotyped image either. Thus, expectations for

older individuals may not align with reality. Ageless or timeless living (Katz, 2001) does not fit

the reality for individuals who may have grey hair and wrinkles, thus appearing old, but run

marathons, or maybe an individual has died their hair black and gotten Botox treatments to

reduce the wrinkles and appear younger, but may have Alzheimer's Disease or Dementia.

Influences of Attitudes about Aging and Older Adults

Influences that help to form people's attitudes about aging and older people come from a

variety of sources. One of these sources is our family, as we learn through how our parents

interact with older people and the feelings that they convey about aging (Roberts, 2002; Ron,

2007). In an American study, Roberts (2002) found "the things that parents believe about the

environment, the culture, and the appropriate ways to relate to one's peers, family, and friends

are passed on to children." Additionally, ageist beliefs then can also be learned from family

processes (Roberts, 2002).

Another influence that has been found to help form people's attitudes about aging and

older individuals is education. Research has found that through education and curricula,

people's knowledge and attitudes about aging can be positively increased (Angiullo, et al., 1996;

Cottle & Glover, 2007; Heycox and Hughes, 2006; Roberts, 2002; Ron, 2007). Two American

studies, Angiullo et al. (1996) and Cottle and Glover (2007), looked at undergraduates at the

beginning of courses that included education on aging and again at the completion of the course.

Both studies found that the respondents had an increase in knowledge about aging that correlated

with an increased positive attitude toward aging and older adults (Angiullo et al., 1996; Cottle &

Glover, 2007). In the Cottle and Glover study, the increase in knowledge from the course

changed the respondents' attitudes from generally negative at the beginning of the study to

generally positive by the end of the study (2007). Interestingly, Cottle and Glover (2007) found

that classes that offer even just a limited amount of information on aging also increase the

knowledge and attitude towards aging and older individuals. Furthermore, a study by Heycox &

Hughes (2006) conducted in Australia found that of 42% of respondents who had reported taking

a course on aging, had also reported an increase in the likelihood of having an interest in working

with older individuals professionally.

Studies have found prior relationships with older adults to have an increase of positive

attitudes towards aging and older individuals (Angiullo et al., 1996; Hawkins, 1996). In one

study, Angiullo et al. (1996), some of the respondents chose to volunteer 30 hours in a nursing

home during the time of their course. These respondents filled out a questionnaire two times,

once at the beginning of a course on aging and once at the end (Angiullo et al., 1996). The

results of the study showed a significant positive difference from the pre-test to post-test

questionnaire which suggests that those who volunteered at the nursing home experienced a

positive change in their attitude about aging and older adults (Angiullo et al., 1996). In a study

out of the United Sates, Hawkins (1996), found respondents who had either felt close to an older

adult or had some kind of prior experience with them, either relatives or non-relatives, had more

positive attitudes towards older individuals overall. In contrast, an Australian study by Heycox

and Hughes (2006) did not find a prior relationship with an older individual to have an association with attitude toward aging or older individuals. The samples for the studies conducted by both Cottle and Glover (2007) and Angiullo et al. (1996) were comprised of undergraduate students at United States' Universities with an unspecified major whereas, the sample for the Heycox and Hughes (2006) study was made up of Social Work students in their final year of study at an Australian University. The possibility of increased knowledge in the area of aging of the Heycox and Hughes (2006) sample, as well as cultural differences, may explain the difference in the findings.

Influences throughout life have an impact on the attitudes and perceptions people develop in regards to aging and older adults. Research conducted in Israel has found that these attitudes and perceptions can change over time (Ron, 2007). Respondents aged 65-92 reported current and past attitudes toward old age and aging. The research found that 75% of the respondents' attitudes had changed from the past until the present time (Ron, 2007).

Influence of Media on Aging and Older Adults

Another source that studies have found to have an influence on people's perceptions about older adults and aging is through television and other media sources such as music, cartoons, jokes, articles and advertisements (Aday & Austin, 2000; Bowd, 2003; Mason, Darnell & Prifti, 2008; Palmore et al., 2005; Roberts, 2002; Signorielli, 2004).

Through stories and images, television is able to show how individuals progress through a lifetime and because many people do not have much contact with older adults, the images and stories they see on television have a great influence on American society's ideas of aging and older adults (Signorielli, 2004). Palmore et al. (2005e), Signorielli (2004) and Roberts (2002)

have found television to exude negative messages about older adults and aging. Signorielli

(2004) studied prime time television network drama shows from 1993-2004 and found it to

celebrate youth and only give a small number of roles on the shows to older adults. Also,

Signorielli's study found that occupations for older adults featured on the shows were less

prestigious than those jobs of the younger characters (2004). Similarly, Palmer et al. (2005e)

found in his research that the usual image of older adults on television exposes aging as an

experience that is unpleasant and preferably avoidable. Furthermore, Roberts' research found

television has such a great impact on age bias, by portraying older adults incorrectly in their

roles, for it to be deemed disturbing (2002).   One of the largest biases begins with the lack of

elderly characters shown on television (Palmore et al., 2005e; Signorielli, 2004). Signorielli

(2004) looked at prime time television shows and determined that less than 3% of the character

roles were that of older adults, and furthermore, actors that were guessed to be between the ages

of 50-64 were cast as some of these elderly characters. Women were fewer in number on prime

time than men and presented more negatively by showing them to age faster than the men and

having reduced capabilities and aspirations in their character roles (Signorielli, 2004).

Music is another form of media that has an opportunity to influence perceptions about

older adults and aging. Aday and Austin looked specifically at the song lyrics of country western

music and found the lyrics reported more negative than positive images and attitudes towards

older adults and aging overall (2000). In this qualitative study, the lyrics were grouped into

seven categories (physical attributes, mobility and reaction time, mental health, reminiscence,

loneliness and isolation, quality of relationships, and mortality) then from there the lyrics were

determined to be perceived as positive, negative or neutral (Aday & Austin, 2000). Aday and

Austin (2000) found that the lyrics that were negative in tone were mostly about mental

attributes, mobility and action time, and loneliness and isolation. Interestingly, when the subject of the song was a specific category of people such as mother, father or grandparent, or the older person who was the subject of the song represented good times in the past, the tone was positive (Aday & Austin, 2000). This positive tone also carried over when the subject of the song lyrics was a significant other (Aday & Austin, 2000).

Humor, through cartoons and jokes, is another form of media that can have an influence on the perceptions of aging and older adults. Research shows that most of the humor related material displays aging and older adults negatively (Bowd, 2003; Mason et al., 2008; Palmore, 2005). The stereotype themes found were the impotent male, the vain/virile male, the sexually insatiable female, the unattractive female, the infirm old person that is frail, incontinent or diseased, the disinterested in sex female, the forgetful old person, possessing childlike qualities, loss of physical or mental abilities, and age concealment (Bowd, 2003; Palmore, 2005). Bowd's research, conducted in Canada, found that only a small percentage, 4% of the total jokes looked at, to be focused on the subject of aging or older adults (2003). Bowd (2003) found that the largest portion of those jokes were about male impotence or the opposite of that, males exaggerating their sexual ability, which suggested in the jokes that the men were not sexually virile. Jokes that had themes about older women were about their insatiable sexual appetite and a decrease in their physical attractiveness (Bowd, 2003). Palmore's research, conducted in the United
States, found that jokes about women tend to be more negative than those about men (2005).

Advertising is another form of media that can have an influence on the perceptions of aging and older adults. American research has found that older people are offended by advertising that has negative images of older individuals (Robinson & Umphrey, 2006).

Furthermore, the images that are shown in advertising affect how younger people perceive older adults and aging and consequently on how they treat older individuals (Robinson & Umphrey, 2006). Another American study, Mason et al. (2008), had 27 students in a gerontology course collect media items in a scrapbook and then determine if they were positive, negative or neutral. They found that out of the 158 advertisements they collected 71 were neutral, while 66 were positive and only 21 were negative (Mason et al., 2008).

Influence of Greeting Cards on Aging and Older Adults

Greeting cards are another media source that may influence the perceptions of aging and older adults. Research has found some of the negative messages in greeting cards to be related to a decrease in physical and mental health, decrease in cognitive ability, loss of youth, loss of senses, loss of sexuality, the need to conceal your age, and life being over thus having nothing to look forward to (Demos & Jache, 1981; Dillon & Spiess Jones, 1981; Ellis & Morrison, 2005). In contrast, there are also some positive messages that research found in greeting cards like age being a state of mind, things get better with age, and celebrating milestones (Demos & Jache, 1981; Dillon & Spiess Jones, 1981; Ellis & Morrison, 2005).

Looking at old-old age specific cards, research found contradicting results. In a Canadian study, Ellis and Morrison (2005) found when looking at the text on the birthday cards that 72% of cards directed at 75-100 year olds fell into the category of "life is essentially over and there is nothing left to look forward to." In contrast, when looking at the images on the birthday cards, Ellis and Morrison (2005) found 31% of the age specific birthday cards directed at 40-59 year olds had negative imagery where only 11% of the cards directed at 60-100 year olds displayed negative imagery. One of the reasons for this discrepancy in the results could be

that the text in the cards viewed "may (have) initially seem(ed) quite positive, however, upon closer inspection, it may be concluded that use of the past tense subtly reinforces the negative stereotypic message that individuals within this age group should rely on their past accomplishments, memories, and experiences to find happiness and contentment because, at their advanced age, life is basically finished" (Ellis & Morrison, 2005).

Research also looked at cards that were specific for male and female recipients. Ellis and Morrison (2005) found that seven out of eight cards that were directed towards men contained negative text about aging. Research that was conducted in Minnesota in 1981 by Demos and Jache found the focus of the negative text on cards for men fall into the category of sexuality in which there is either "a loss of interest in having sex or a loss of ability to perform sexually." When in comparison to females, Ellis and Morrison found four out of five cards for them contained negative text. Further research by Demos and Jache (1981) showed that the negative messages for the female specific cards were most often about appearance or age concealment.

Demos and Jache (1981) argue that birthday cards are different than other forms of media because they are given directly to the recipient thus having a direct impact that other media does not. Furthermore, Minichiello et al. (2000) found face-to-face ageism can have an effect on older individuals to assess themselves as old after a negative encounter. Thus, it can be determined that should an older adult receive a greeting card with an ageist prose, they may begin to perceive themselves as old. Interestingly, studies have found that in the greeting card world that 29 is the age that separate adults from being young to being referred to as old (Demos & Jache, 1981; Dillon & Spiess Jones, 1981).

Dillon and Spiess Jones interviewed a Hallmark spokesperson in 1981 when they conducted their research and reported that the typical buyers and recipients of the humor related birthday cards that are ageist in nature are for people in their late 20's and early 30's. Hallmark also remarked that age angle cards were still very popular and there was no plan to remove those cards from their line, but also acknowledged that because of the genuine concern that this line of cards produces, it would continue to be examined in future years (Dillon & Spiess Jones, 1981). In 2005, when Ellis and Morrison completed further research in this area, findings revealed that a smaller percentage of greeting cards highlighted physical and cognitive decline, only 18.6%, compared to 56 % of the cards looked at in 1981 by Dillon and Spiess Jones and 55% of the cards looked at by Demos and Jache also in 1981.

There is limited research specific to greeting cards and the attitudes that they convey about aging and older individuals. There were only three studies found unique to this area, with two of the studies conducted in 1981 and one in 2005. So, in addition to the lack of research, that which is available is not current. Understanding ageism and what influences ageism in our society is an important knowledge base for present day social workers to have. This study will explore if the messages in age specific greeting cards available currently, written for individuals age 60 and over, portray more positive or negative perceptions about aging and older individuals.

Conceptual Framework

"Ageism can most simply be defined as negative attitudes or behaviors toward an individual solely based on that person's age" (Nelson, 2002, p. 27). One factor that makes ageism unique to other forms of prejudice is that older people were once young and most young people will one day be elderly (Nelson, 2002, p. 28). Thus, barring an untimely early death all people will one day have to face ageism themselves.

To process information more effectively, humans categorize objects, events and people for their similarities (Nelson, 2002, p.5). Older adults, being a group of people with similarities, thus naturally get grouped together in people's minds. When looking at groups of people as a whole, it is then natural to signify certain characteristics to describe the people in the group, otherwise known as stereotyping (Nelson, 2002, p. 7). Common negative stereotypes for older adults are withdrawn, isolated, unattractive, a burden, lonely, unproductive, dependent on others, inflexible, dull, uncooperative, unhealthy, useless, poor, depressed, and inactive (Minichiello, et al., 2000; Palmore, Branch, and Harris, 2005d; Ron, 2007; Woolf, 1998). There are also some positive stereotypes associated with aging and older adults such as motivated, busy, useful, supportive, content, active, and also being respected for their knowledge, experience and wisdom (Minichiello et al, 2000; Ron, 2007). These stereotypes, both positive and negative, cannot be used to accurately describe older adults as a whole, and contribute to the ageism that is seen in our society.

There are different theories based on ageism. One theory is the Social Developmental View of Ageism that concludes that "ageist attitudes are embedded in broader social perceptions that unfold with development" (Nelson, 2002, p.77). The Social Developmental View looks at

perceptual, cognitive, affective and social cultural systems that contribute to ageist perceptions (Nelson, 2002, p. 77). After finding the systems that contribute to ageism, more research can then find ways to eradicate the negative factors to promote positive change and, thus, reduce ageism (Nelson, 2002, p.77).

The sociological commercial system of the media is one system that has an effect on the interpretation of how society views aging and thus also influences how older adults in turn feel about aging and older adults (Minichiello et al., 2000; Ron, 2007; Woolf, 1998). Research has shown that society is influenced about aging through the media (Aday & Austin, 2000; Bowd, 2003; Mason, Darnell & Prifti, 2008; Palmore et al., 2005; Roberts, 2002; Signorielli, 2004). Thus, if the media portrays older individuals and aging negatively or unrealistically, then society will view older adults and aging negatively or unrealistically, and further, older adults will view themselves and their aging process negatively or unrealistically.

Signorielli (2004) has found that part of the problem with media having such a large influence on how society views older adults is because society has less contact with older individuals. Older adults are gathered in warm weather states like Florida, Texas and Arizona living in retirement communities away from family and out of site of those who live away from these areas. These circumstances then allow media outlets to provide society with their versions of aging and being older that are often negative and unrealistic, which then cause individuals to dread getting older (Signorielli, 2004). In addition, Katz (2001) found a false portrayal of aging in advertising which showed older adults being independent and healthy and going from middle age to old age without any difficulty. This portrayal of the new image of aging is not realistic for many older adults (Katz, 2001). Mason et al (2008) believe that as the population of older adults increase in our society, so too will the accurate representation of older adults and aging, and then

the media will begin to show a larger demographic of older adults in their level of abilities, interests and needs.

Methods

Introduction

A qualitative study was carried out by the researcher to determine if the messages in age specific greeting cards that are produced specifically for individuals age 60 and older portray more positive or negative perceptions about aging or older individuals. This study used an exploratory research methodology. This method allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the message that birthday cards reveal to older adults.

Sample and Data Collection

The non-probability, convenience sample for this study included 83 greeting cards. The cards were birthday specific as well as age specific for recipients that are the ages of 60 and older. The sample looked at messages that were purposely designated for the elderly population in regards to the acknowledgement of a birthday. The cards were obtained from a variety of locations throughout the Minneapolis and St. Paul area that sell greeting cards including specialty card stores, large retail establishments, pharmacies, grocery stores and smaller specialty stores. The researcher traveled to multiple stores, in three separate communities, to purchase the age specific birthday cards ensuring that there were no duplicates. At each location, the researcher purchased every age specific card the retailer had in stock for each specific age group of 60 and older.

Data Analysis

Once the cards were purchased, the researcher transcribed the words on the cards to words on paper. To determine the findings, the researcher used grounded theory methods. With

grounded theory methods, the theories of the data were formed by looking at data to see what themes formed from them (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). The researcher accomplished this by looking at the written messages of each greeting card and coding each separately. Coding was the process of simplifying the data while at the same time keeping the meaning (Monette et al., 2011.) The researcher then looked at the individual codes that were listed to determine patterns by which codes appeared multiple times, thus becoming a theme in the research. The researcher completed a reliability check on the coding by completing a self recoding on one tenth of the written messages. Throughout the process, the researcher documented each step of progress of obtaining and formulating the data in a journal.

Findings

Negative Stereotypes

One theme that was found in the research was negative stereotypes about aging. The

content of the theme centered on hearing loss, memory loss, an increased need for medication,

talk about dull topics, and decreased physical ability. The following excerpts from some of the

cards are examples of these themes.

60?! Don't worry-we're still just kids…trapped inside the bodies of old people.

There's a reason "sixty" and "sexy" sound alike! The hearing is starting to go.

Turning 60 is something to be proud of. In fact, lots of 60 year old love to tell people

how old they are…and what kind of pie they like and what time they go to the bathroom and…

Don't be upset about turning 60. Lots of people are sixty! Why, if you were to take all

the sixty year-olds in the world and lay them end to end…very few of them would be able to get

back up under their own power. Anyway, Happy 60th Birthday.!

60 is when you start asking yourself life's big questions. Like "why did I come into this

room? I knew a minute ago…"

Positive Stereotypes

Two separate major themes emerged from the data that include positive stereotypes about

aging or being an older adult. These themes were wisdom and lives touched/inspiration.

Wisdom

A second theme found in the research, a positive stereotype about aging, was that older people are wise or have wisdom. The following excerpts from some of the cards are examples of this theme.

Older people are wise and long life brings understanding.

Now you can add that to your list of all the other wonderful things you deserve to be proud of. Like the wisdom you've gained and shared through a lifetime of learning.

Wow to your unique blend of experience, wisdom and heart.

You are 95 years wise.

Lives touched/inspiration

Another positive stereotype theme, older adults have touched many lives and they are inspirational, was also found in the research. The following excerpts from some of the cards are examples of this theme.

...touching the lives of generation after generation.

There is simply no counting the lives you've touched during your 80 years.

You measure a life by more than just birthdays. You measure it by people whose lives you've touch and those who have touched yours.

Yet more than the years, it's the hearts you have touched that make you a real inspiration.

Your life is an inspiration,

Memories

Another theme found in the research was about memories. The following excerpts from some of the cards are examples of this theme.

Hope you'll celebrate your 80th birthday surrounded by the warmth of happy memories…

You must have a world of fond memories from all of these one hundred years-A million bright, meaningful moments your heart keeps as sweet souvenirs.

"Each year brings memories that bless our lives with joy." Wishing you the joy of pleasant memories.…

May the warm memories of the best of times bring special joy to your celebration

May you enjoy recalling many warm and wonderful moments…fond recollections of special people, special times, and special places. Though time may pass, a memory stays, reminding us of happy days.

Celebrate

A fifth theme found in the research is celebrate. The theme includes celebrating the past as well as the present. The following excerpts from some of the cards are examples of this theme.

Your 70th birthday…a chance…to celebrate who you are. Celebrate the road you've traveled. Celebrate the road you're traveling…

Celebrating eighty years of memories, successes, smiles, happy hearts, good times, and love.

Celebrating your 100 years The roads you've walked, the suns you've seen, the joys you've gathered in between, the years you've lived and all they mean….we celebrate with you!

Today we celebrate your remarkable life.

Celebrating your 80th birthday? Adding an 80th candle doesn't make you older. It just makes your life brighter! They're not 80 candles…they're 80 years to celebrate!

New Image of Aging

One last theme found in the research is about the new image of aging. This theme is centered on older adults being sexy, wild, exciting, and acting young. The following excerpts from some of the cards are examples of this theme.

The good news? 60 is the new 40! The bad news? You have 25 more years until retirement!

Sixty, sexy, sizzling..and got it goin' on!

70 ain't what it used to be!

60 years ago, you were born to be wild. Ride on!

60 is about feeling excited to be alive at a time when you're free to really live. 60 is about knowing yourself, being yourself-and truly liking who you've become. But most of all, 60 is about celebrating the beginning of the most beautiful years of your life.

Discussion

There were several themes found in the prose of age specific birthday cards specific for people 60 and older. The first theme, negative stereotypes, included prose about old bodies, hearing loss, memory loss, increased need for medication, older adult's conversations about dull topics, and decreased physical ability. These negative stereotypes about older adults and aging found in greeting cards were supported by the research. Demos and Jache (1981), Dillon and Spiess Jones (1981), and Ellis and Morrison (2005) also found negative messages related to a decrease in physical and mental health, decrease in cognitive ability, loss of youth, loss of senses, loss of sexuality, and the need to conceal your age. Interestingly, this researcher found the cards that contained negative stereotypes in their prose were mostly those cards targeted for those celebrating their 60th birthday, with the exception of two cards being targeted for those turning 70 years old. This evidence may suggest that society feels that those who are 60 years old do not fit with these traditional negative stereotypes of aging so they can be teased about the negative stereotypes in what some may consider humorous cards. With the lack of these kinds of cards for those 65 and older, society may be sending the message that they feel that these stereotypes are accurate for those who fit into the older age groups.

There were also positive attributes about aging and older adults that were found in this study. Some of the cards discussed older adults being wise, having wisdom, touching many lives or being an inspiration to others. Past research by Minichiello et al. (2000) and Ron (2007) supported this finding that being respected for their knowledge, experience and wisdom are attributes that older adults associated with aging even using the term "sageism" to describe this positive stereotype of older adults being wise or "sages." Although past research of greeting cards also found positive attributes about aging, like age being a state of mind, things get better

with age and celebrating milestones (Demos & Jache, 1981; Dillon & Spiess Jones, 1981; Ellis & Morrison, 2005), these attributes did not align with the present findings about the type of positive attributes found by this researcher. The positive stereotypes found in this study may be indicating a change in greeting card messages being written for older adults.

Another theme, memories, was common in the prose. When reading the cards, the researcher's initial analysis was that these types of cards were more positive than negative towards aging and older adults, but after further review the researcher determined that the emphasis was really about past memories or memories being made about this present birthday, but did not encourage future memories to be made, thus concluding that the recipient of the card is considered to be too old to anticipate future happy memories after this birthday is over. Research by Ellis and Morrison (2005) also supported this finding by conveying that some of the cards they looked at were subtly reinforcing negative stereotypes by sending the message "that individuals within this age group should rely on their past accomplishments, memories and experiences to find happiness and contentment because, at their advanced age, life is basically finished."

Another theme that stood out in many of the cards was that of celebration. The prose suggested the recipient celebrate themselves, the past, the present and even the future. Some of the greeting cards in this theme were more positive about aging and older adults whereas others were more negative. The cards that talked about celebrating self or the future were more positive whereas the cards that talked about celebrating the past memories and years that have been lived offered no hope for the future, thus making them present as negative. This theme of celebration is one area that prior research did not touch on, but the researcher felt that it was an important theme to note since it was prominent in many of the cards that were looked at for this study.

One last theme the researcher found introduced the new image of aging. This theme included the idea that there are many more years to work before retiring, that being older isn't what it used to be, being sexy, wild, and just beginning the most beautiful years of life. This theme was supported by the research which found that older adults are developing a new image of aging by remaining active both physically and intellectually, eating healthy, and acting and thinking young (Minichiello et al, 2000).

The messages presented in the greeting cards that were designed specifically for adults age 60 and older displayed many forms of ageism both positive and negative in nature. This study showed how a simple novelty such as a greeting card can have implications of sending ageist messages to the intended recipient and the greater society. It is important for individuals, families and professionals such as social workers to have an understanding of the messages in different forms of media that are being sent to older adults and society at large about aging, as it can and does have an influence on how older adults view themselves and how others view them. Social workers need to be aware of their own ageist assumptions when working with older adults, which is true for social workers working with any specific group, so as to be able to treat each person individually and not the same as the next older adult. Another implication of study for social work practice is to be thorough in completing assessments when working with older adults and addressing the impact of ageism on their lives. Lastly, social workers need to address social justice issues concerning ageism by participating in anti-ageism initiatives.

There were limitations of this study that are worth noting.   The first limitation is that all of the cards were purchased in just three separate communities of the same metropolitan area of Minnesota thus, the findings may not be indicative of age specific greeting cards that can be purchased in other communities within Minnesota or other areas around the United Sates. Future

research could include a larger sample of cards from areas all around the nation. Another

limitation is that the researcher, who did not qualify as an intended target for the age specific

cards for age 60 and older, concluded the findings independently determining if the prose was

more positive or negative to aging and older adults. Future research could include a sampling of

the intended target to see if they personally feel the prose is more positive or negative about

aging and towards their selves. Also in the future, the researcher could have a second,

independent evaluator review the data for increased reliability in the coding of the data.

Future research on the messages presented in greeting cards as well as other media

outlets and how it relates to ageism will be helpful for older adults, families and professionals

alike. More research regarding the factors that influence people's perceptions about aging and

older adults will increase social workers' knowledge in this area which in turn will be important

to increasing the number of social workers who are interested in working with older adults as

their numbers are quickly growing in the United States. The end result will produce social

workers who are prepared to assist older adults and their families successfully through the end

years of older adults' lives.

References

Aday, R. H., & Austin, B. S. (2000). Images of aging in the lyrics of American country music. *Educational Gerontology, 26*(2), 135-154. doi:10.1080/036012700267295

Ageism: Stereotypes about age and older persons, why ageism exists in American culture, the role of the media in supporting ageism. Retrieved 9/4, 2011, from http://medicine.jrank.org/pages/62/ageism.html

Angiullo, L., Whitbourne, S. K. & Powers, C. (1996). The effects of instruction and experience on college students' attitudes toward the elderly. *Educational Gerontology, 22*(5), 483.

Bowd, A. D. (2003). Stereotypes of elderly persons in narrative jokes. *Research on Aging, 25*(1), 22.

Calasanti, T. (2005). Ageism, gravity, and gender: Experiences of aging bodies. *Generations, 29*(3), 8-12.

Cottle, N. R., & Glover, R. J. (2007). Combating ageism: Change in student knowledge and attitudes regarding aging. *Educational Gerontology, 33*(6), 501-512. doi:10.1080/03601270701328318

Dahmen, N. S., & Cozma, R. (2009). *Media takes: On aging.* California: International Longevity Center-USA and Aging Services of California.

Demos, V., & Jache, A. (1981). When you care enough: An analysis of attitudes toward aging in humorous birthday cards. *The Gerontologist, 21*(2), 209-215.

Dillon, K. M., & Spiess Jones, B. (1981). Attitudes toward aging portrayed by birthday cards.

International Journal of Aging & Human Development, 13(1)

Ellis, S. R., & Morrison, T. G. (2005). *Stereotypes of ageing: Messages promoted by age-specific*

paper birthday cards available in Canada. Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.

Hawkins, M. J. (1996). College students' attitudes toward elderly persons. *Educational*

Gerontology, 22(3), 271.

Heycox, K. & Hughes, M. (2006). Social work students' attitudes towards and interest in

working with older people: An exploratory study. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare*

Education, 8(1), 6-14.

Katz, S. (2001). Growing older without aging? Positive aging, anti-ageism, and anti-aging.

Generations, 25(4), 27.

Levy, B. R., Slade, M. D., Kunkel, S. R., & Kasl, S. V. (2002). Longevity increased by positive

self-perceptions of aging. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 83*(2), 261-270.

doi:10.1037//0022-3514.83.2.261

Mason, S. E., Darnell, E. A., & Prifti, K. (2008). Stereotypes and representations of aging in the

media. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 37*(2), 189-190.

Merriam-Webster. (2011). Retrieved 9/19, 2011, from www.merriam-webster.com

Minichiello, V., Browne, J., & Kendig, H. (2000). Perceptions and consequences of ageism:

Views of older people. *Ageing & Society, 20*(03), 253.

Monette, D. R., Sullivan, T. J., & DeJong, C. R. (2011). *Applied social research :A tool for the human services* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.

Nelson, T.D. (2002). *Ageism: Stereotyping and prejudice against older persons.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Palmore, E. (2005). Three decades of research on ageism. *Generations, 29*(3), 87-90.

Palmore, E. B., Branch, L., & Harris, D. K. (2005a). Age denial. *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, 9-12.

Palmore, E. B., Branch, L., & Harris, D. K. (2005b). Cultural sources of ageism. *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, 93-95.

Palmore, E. B., Branch, L., & Harris, D. K. (2005c). Responses to ageism. *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, 261-264.

Palmore, E. B., Branch, L., & Harris, D. K. (2005d). Stereotypes. *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, 301-303.

Palmore, E. B., Branch, L., & Harris, D. K. (2005e). Television. *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, 316-317.

Roberts, J. M. (2002). *Ethics adherence as a predictor of age bias in social work practice with older adults.* (Ph.D., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University).

Robinson, T., & Umphery, D. (2006). *First- and third-person perceptions of images of older people in advertising: An inter-generational evaluation.* Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.

Ron, P. (2007). Elderly people's attitudes and perceptions of aging and old age: The role of

cognitive dissonance? *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 22*(7), 656-662.

doi:10.1002/gps.1726

Signorielli, N. (2004). Aging on television: Messages relating to gender, race, and occupation in

prime time. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 48*(2), 279-301.

Vincent, G. & Velkoff, V. (2010). *The next four decades the older population in the united

states: 2010 to 2050.* (Current Population Reports No. P25-1138). Washington, D.C.: US

Department of Commerce.

Woolf, L. M. (1998). *Effects of age and gender on perceptions of younger and older adults.*

(Ph.D., Webster University).