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Attitudes Towards Aging

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was two-fold: to examine the relationship between various factors, such as age, education level, knowledge about the aging process, and attitude towards aging, and to find out if there were any significant differences between genders. Participants, which included 60 women and 26 men, ranging in age from 18 to 94, completed a three-part on-line survey. It was hypothesized that older participants and those with higher education, sociability, and knowledgeable about the aging process would perceive growing older more favorably. Results indicated a significant correlation between education and knowledge ($p < .01$), between knowledge and attitude ($p < .05$), and between age and attitude ($p < .05$), which confirmed previous research results. No significant gender differences were found in regards to knowledge and attitude, but results revealed a very high correlation between chronological age and perceived “old age” ($p < .01$).

Attitudes Towards Aging

Thanks to improved living conditions and advanced health care, most Americans enjoy longer, healthier, and more productive lives than ever before (Intel, 2004). This increased longevity has prompted an explosion of research on the physical as well as psychological aspects of aging. Results of these studies have revealed that a healthy diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids, regular exercise, balanced hormone levels, and adequate sleep (UCSF, 2000, 2009) keep some of the normal age-related physical and cognitive declines at bay. Staying intellectually tuned in and socially engaged appear to be major contributors to successful aging as well (Garret, 2009).

Although the largest growing segment of the American population is the 85+ group (Taylor, 2007), we live in a youth-oriented society, where “getting old” is not desired. Prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices towards seniors, also known as “ageism” (McContha, Schnell, Volkein, Riley, & Leach, 2003) have caused some elderly to feel unwanted, to be unwilling to seek needed services and health care, and to withdraw from society. Many people dread getting older because they don't have positive views on aging; this seems to be caused by their belief in negative stereotypes, which have been perpetuated by the media for decades (Glass & Knott, 1984).

To measure knowledge and common misconceptions about aging, Dr. Erdman Palmore designed the first “Facts on Aging Quiz” (1988). Results of his and similar quizzes have suggested that many people believe numerous myths about the elderly, reinforcing negative attitudes toward “getting old.” Glass and Knott (1984) designed a 12-hour workshop, named “Facts and Fiction About Aging,” to study whether giving a more realistic and optimistic spin on aging through imagery, music, and hands-on art, could alter some of the negative age-related stereotypes. Before and after questionnaires showed that such workshops could improve opinions

about aging. Only in recent years has an attempt been made by companies that cater to the older population, such as investment firms, senior living communities, and health care companies like Kaiser Permanente, to make the public more receptive towards aging through “feel-good” television commercials. Even though lyrics like “When I grow up, I want to be an old woman” have most probably evoked some smiles, one might wonder how many years it will take to convince the current baby-boomers and the next generations to truly believe that “old” is “great.”

Research by Levy (2003) suggest that active participation in society through clubs and volunteering, and physical activity contribute to a more positive attitude towards aging. Despite the fact that certain physical and cognitive declines are a normal part of aging (Garret, 2009) and numerous studies have documented that all segments of society hold negative attitudes towards aging (Glass & Knott, 1984), many seniors over 65 report living a fulfilling life. This sounds like a paradox, but it is plausible that the seniors who respond to age-related questionnaires, possess several of the above-mentioned characteristics, thus solving this mystery.

The objective of this survey was to examine whether there was a relationship between various factors, such as age, education levels, knowledge of the aging process and attitude towards aging. Based on previous research I hypothesized that older participants, and those with higher education, sociability, and knowledgeable about the aging process would perceive growing older more favorably. Out of curiosity I also wanted to find out if there were gender differences in regards to knowledge about and attitude towards aging, and whether there was a significant positive correlation between chronological age and perceived “old age.”

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 60 females and 26 males between the ages of 18 and

74. All participants were part of convenience sampling; while most were invited to complete the survey via electronic mail (an easy link to the correct site was provided), some participants were my classmates in Psychology 018 at Evergreen Valley College, whom I personally encouraged to take my survey via the class link.

Materials

The survey was posted on the Internet; it included a welcome message, 27 questions, and a thank you note (Appendix). The survey section consisted of three parts; the first part encompassed demographics, sociability, and personal satisfaction questions (part A), the second part attempted to gauge the participants' knowledge of the aging process (part B), and the last part asked about their personal feeling towards growing older (part C).

Design and Procedure

This was a non-experimental study that looked for several correlations and differences. The variables in this study were gender, education, attitude towards aging, knowledge of the aging process, sociability, and chronological and perceived old age. Participants completed the survey using any computer. First they were informed about anonymity, risks and benefits, age requirements, and their right to quit at any time. After filling out the survey, a parting message revealed the aim of the study. The participants were thanked and given an e-mail address for further inquiry about the findings if so desired.

Results

Only the data of fully-completed surveys (86 of 92) were included in this study. A higher sociability score meant that the participant was more involved with friends and activities (part A), more knowledge was represented by a lower number (8 - 48) on the questions in part B, and for attitude a lower number (7 - 42) meant a more positive attitude towards aging (part C).

A Pearson correlation between sociability and attitude towards aging was not significant with $r(84) = -0.04, p > .05$, two-tailed. A Pearson correlation between educational level and knowledge about aging was found to be significant with $r(84) = -0.26, p < .05$, two-tailed. A Spearman correlation between knowledge and attitude towards aging was found to be highly significant with $\rho(84) = 0.59, p < .01$, two-tailed. A Spearman correlation between age and attitude towards aging was also found to be significant with $\rho(84) = -0.31, p < .05$, two-tailed. When gender and attitude were compared, females ($M = 23.58, SD = 6.5$) and males ($M = 22.19, SD = 4.44$) had very similar values. A 2 sample t-test showed that there was no significant difference in attitude towards aging between genders, $t(84) = -1.15, p > .05$. Likewise, when gender and knowledge about the aging process were compared, females ($M = 17.57, SD = 5.46$) and males ($M = 17.81, SD = 4.6$) had almost identical values. Once again, a 2 sample t-test showed that there was no significant difference in knowledge between genders, $t(84) = 0.21, p > .05$. A Pearson correlation between chronological age and perceived “old age” was found to be highly significant with $r(84) = 0.48, p < .01$, two-tailed. The mean “old age” was 71, and the average difference was 30 years.

Discussion

Contrary to previous research and one of my hypotheses, participants who reported more social involvement did not perceive aging more favorably; older participants however, did have a more positive attitude towards aging, which confirmed my prediction. The results of this survey also supported my hypothesis that higher education and knowledge about aging go hand in hand, and people with more knowledge are very likely to have a much more positive outlook on aging. No significant gender differences were found in regards to knowledge of and attitude towards aging, but as the chronological age of the respondent climbed, the perceived “old age” also

shifted upwards, indicating a strong positive correlation.

There were some limitations in this study; despite the large sample size, it did not represent the general population as approximately 70% were females, 74% of the participants had an AA degree or higher, and over 41% of them reported a household income of \$80,000 or more. Because this sample appears privileged, extrapolating the findings of this survey to the general population would not be advisable.

Although the questions were carefully chosen, responses on the statement “60 is the new 40” were incorporated in the attitude score, and therefore should have been included in part C rather than in part B. The last questions of the survey was a compound question, which hindered interpretation. In future surveys I would use better phrasing, make the questions more specific, and avoid compound questions.

Because of the way the answers were calibrated, the findings came out counterintuitive; as a result data analysis was unnecessarily complicated and the plots were hard to read. Careful consideration when assigning values to Likert scale answers might make the final data much easier to interpret.

Taking previous research and this study's findings into account, there is enough evidence to suggest that as people become better informed on the process of aging, their attitude towards growing older would most likely improve. Distributing a brochure, emphasizing the positive aspects of aging and dispelling the myths, could possibly help change the general public's stereotypical views and make for a happier group of retirees.

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Appendix

Attitudes Towards Aging

In this study, you will be presented with several questions about you and about aging. This research is completely anonymous. You will not be asked to provide your name. There are no inherent risks or benefits to participating in this study beyond the contribution you will be making to cumulative psychological science. Your choice to participate in this research is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and your decision to withdraw will have no penalty to you. However, if you leave before completing the survey, we will not be able to use your data.

If you agree to these conditions, and you are at least 18, please proceed with the study.

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This study has been approved by the instructor for Psychology 018 at Evergreen Valley College. Contact: J. David Eisenberg david.eisenberg@evc.edu

Part A: All about you.

1. What is your gender?

2. How old are you?

3. What is your marital status?

Single Married Divorced Widowed

4. What is your highest educational level?

No high school

Some high school

High school graduate

Some college

AA degree

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Doctoral degree and beyond

5. What is your annual household income?

less than \$20,000

between \$20,000 and \$39,000

between \$40,000 and \$59,000

between \$60,000 and \$79,000

between \$80,000 and \$99,000

between \$100,000 and \$125,000

more than \$ 125,000

6. What is your overall health?

Poor

Below average

Average

Above average

Excellent

7. How many hours a week are you physically active? (gym, walking, dancing, gardening...)

0

1

2

3

4

5

6

7 or more

8. How many hours do you actively participate in hobbies or volunteering on a weekly basis?

None

1

2

3

4

5

6

7 or more

9. How many friends (outside of work) do you keep contact with on a weekly basis?

None

1

2

3

4 or more

10. How would you describe your life experience? (health, looks, spendable income,

friends/family)

I am happy with all aspects of my life

I am happy with most aspects of my life

I am unhappy with most aspects of my life

I am unhappy with all aspects of my life

11. What age do you consider old?

Part B: Your opinion counts!

1. Most older people are chronically ill.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Somewhat agree

Agree

Strongly agree

The same 6 point Likert scale was used for all remaining questions.

2. Older people are financial burdens on society.

3. Elderly can be productive workers.

4. The majority of people over 65 are senile.

5. As people grow older their intelligence declines significantly.

6. Today's 60 is the new 40.

7. In general most old people are alike.

8. Older people adapt well to new environment.

9. In regards to aging, after 50 it is nothing but downhill.

Part C: Tell us about your personal journey.

1. As I get older, my opinion about "old age" has become more positive.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Somewhat disagree

Somewhat agree

Agree

Strongly agree

The same 6 point Likert scale was used for all remaining questions.

2. As time goes on, I feel more anxious about “getting older”,
3. I look forward to my later years in life.
4. I will do anything to hide signs of aging by using hair dyes, anti-wrinkle creams. And other products.
5. I would never consider using Viagra or other products that could enhance the sexual experience of my partner and I.
6. I expect or have experienced some declines as I get older but I am not too worried about it.

In this study you were asked some personal and some age-related questions. We are trying to find out if attitude towards aging changes with age, if there are gender differences, and if knowledge about the aging process or higher education and income levels influence the perception on aging.

Thank you for your participation! If you would like to see the results of this survey, please email david.eisenberg@evc.edu after 1 June, 2009
