Redefining ‘Old’
AN EXAMINATION OF FACE STRATEGIES USED TO CONFRONT AGESTER STEREOTYPES
Jennifer Oppor with Faculty Mentor, Dr. Martha Fay | Department of Communication and Journalism

ABSTRACT

“The wiser mind mourns less for what age takes away than what it leaves behind.”

William Wordsworth

Through instructor evaluations, college students have been bestowed with extraordinary power, and their judgments have often been negatively tied to their instructor’s age. Colleagues are also positioned to judge the quality of their peer’s work through their status on Department Personnel Committees. This may be of particular concern to older employees, who have reported experiencing stereotype threat, a factor linked with lower levels of engagement; supervisors have also reported more negative perceptions of older workers, even controlling for actual abilities. Older educators have a unique opportunity to reshape perceptions about aging when confronted with a stereotype in conversation, but research has previously focused only on the goals and behaviors of the younger interlocutor. We analyzed responses of 83 educators ages 50 and older to find out how they responded to an agestereotype, qualitatively identifying specific face behaviors and quantitatively tying them to the desired outcomes following a confrontation. Using structuration as a theoretical lens, we show how the target of a stereotype can communicatively strategize to manage or transcend the perceived judgement, thus contributing to a more positive social construction of aging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stereotype threat is the psychological distress people experience when a negative stereotype directly relates to their identity, and they perceive that their behavior may be conforming to the stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This behavior is highly problematic because reinforcing degrading agestereotypes has become so common that it may even be deemed the stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This behavior is highly problematic because

**Undesirable outcomes:** decreased agency, lowered self-esteem (Aspinall-Bourret, 2015)

**Student evaluations negatively related to age and gender** (Wilson, Bayer, & Montano, 2014)

**Ageist stereotypes at work focus on decline, loss, lessened abilities** (Glearda & Trigg, 2013)

**Face tactics include aggression, apology, compromise, humor** (Vinson, 2000)

**Communication Accommodation Theory - alter style to manage outcomes** (Gleka, 2016)

**Younger adults often use patronizing language with older adults** (Myers, 1998)

**Facework strategies used by older instructors affects their credibility** (Kerssen-Griswold, 2003)

**METHODS**

- 83 educators aged 50 or older (33% ages 50-55)
- 69% women
- Six communicative strategies (four known framework, two distinct ideas)
- Eleven initial themes coded for desired outcomes
- Constant comparison method, axial coding - collapse outcomes by conceptual similarity
- Themes defined and operationalized using category-specific example comments
- Variables created in SPSS using codes to examine pairs of strategies and outcomes

**RESULTS**

**Six Strategies:**

- Defense - protecting or repairing of one’s image through the excuses, justification, or denial
- Promotion - speaking favorably of one’s skills, accomplishments, or merits
- Ingratiation - sharing compliments, praise, or agreement to appear friendly and likeable
- Exemplification - modeling behaviors or values for others to emulate
- Humor - using laughter to acknowledge or avoid an interlocutor’s comment
- Lack of action - reverting to silence, removing oneself from the area, or doing nothing

**RQ 1:** What facework tactics do older educators use when confronted with a stereotype about aging?

**RQ 2:** Are facework tactics used by older educators associated with their relationship with the interaction partner (interlocutor)?

**RQ 3:** Do the facework strategies used by older educators when confronted with a stereotype about aging align with their desired outcome?

**RESULTS CONT.**

**Analysis of Data:**

- Pearson Correlation analysis
- Strategies significantly, positively correlated with desired outcome
- $r = .34$, $p < .001$
- ANOVA
- Different pairings of strategies and outcomes were statistically significant
- F(4,115) = 10.79, p < .001
- Data was insufficient for generalizations, yet suggests potential linkages

**DISCUSSION**

Adults who were threatened by agestereotypes became less involved at work causing the company to lose valuable intellectual assets (Boone-James, Mckechnie, Swanberg & Isean, 2013). Although our study is limited to educators, these same strategies may be used by older adults in other contexts. Our findings are even more important since the number of younger professionals entering the workforce continues to increase. These results offer potentially empowering tools for older workers who hope to refame society’s view of aging.

**Implications:**

1. Provide typology of facework strategies older adults employ to transcend stereotypes
2. Reframe stereotypical perceptions to focus evaluations on factors other than age
3. Offer practical assistance by uncovering personal biases and motivations in interactions
4. Advocate for companies to foster a culture of positive messages to reduce ageism
5. Present leadership training seminars to teach strategies for eliciting desired outcomes
6. Disrupt the perpetuation of agestereotypes
7. Empower individuals to transform current societal schemes
8. Help older adults shape stereotypes through strategic communication (Structuration Theory)

**REFERENCES**

Printed copies available upon request

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