

# Growing Older: Young Adults' Attitudes Toward Aging and the Elderly

Aeriel Elliott & Barbara Coleman

## Introduction

Stereotypes can have a strong influence on how people interact with one another. Although research shows that there are both positive and negative stereotypes of the elderly (e.g. Kite & Johnson, 1988), sadly many young adults perceive the elderly in a negative light (Hummert 1990).

Researchers have different ideas about the reasons behind young adults' negative perceptions of the elderly. Chasteen (2000) posited that attitudes toward aging in American society might explain young adults' perceptions of the elderly. Consistent with this idea, research suggests that our society as a whole has a deep-rooted distaste toward aging (Hummert, et al., 1995). The purpose of this study was to determine the content of the stereotypes young adults have about the elderly and to investigate whether young adults' attitudes toward their own aging would influence their perceptions. We predicted that young adults with more positive attitudes toward aging would have more positive stereotypes of the elderly, while young adults with more negative attitudes toward aging would have more negative perceptions of the elderly.

## Method

### Participants

Ninety-eight undergraduate students (75 females, 23 males; ages 18-29) from Angelo State University participated in this study. 53.1% of the students were Caucasian, 29.2% Hispanic, 11.2% African American, and 6% reported other ethnicities.

### Independent Variable

Participants viewed one of two randomized presentations of nine photographs of young adults age 18 to 35, and nine photographs of elderly adults age 65 + (Kennedy, Hope, & Raz, 2009) - each with an accompanying description of the individual's lifestyle. The age of the person accompanying each description was counterbalanced. For example, in one condition a description was paired with a photo of an elderly woman named Carol, while in the counterbalanced condition, the same description was paired with a photo of a young Carol. Both African American and Caucasian photos were used. The independent variable in this research was the age of the people in the photos- everything else in the two conditions, including the descriptions of the people was exactly the same. The following are examples of stimuli that participants viewed:



Name: Marilyn  
Sex: Female  
Age: 68



Name: Marilyn  
Sex: Female  
Age: 21

*"Marilyn is a customer service representative at a local clothing store. She is single and has one daughter. Although she is gets along fairly well with everyone, she would prefer to work at a job where she only has to interact with a few people."*



Name: James  
Sex: Male  
Age: 81



Name: James  
Sex: Male  
Age: 23

*"James is a part-time writer for a magazine. He is single with no children but does have a close relationship with one of his nephews. He knows many people, but only has a few close friends. He is a home-body, preferring to spend time with his friends at his home than out at a large social gathering."*

### Dependent Variable

We used the Aging Opinion Survey (Kafer et al., 1980) with a 7-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree). Example: *"I dread the day I look in the mirror and see gray hairs."* Participants also rated individuals on traits reflecting warmth and competence (e.g., likable, friendly, efficient, competent).

### Procedure

Participants first completed the Aging Opinion Survey, then viewed the photos, read the descriptions, and rated their impressions of each of the individuals.

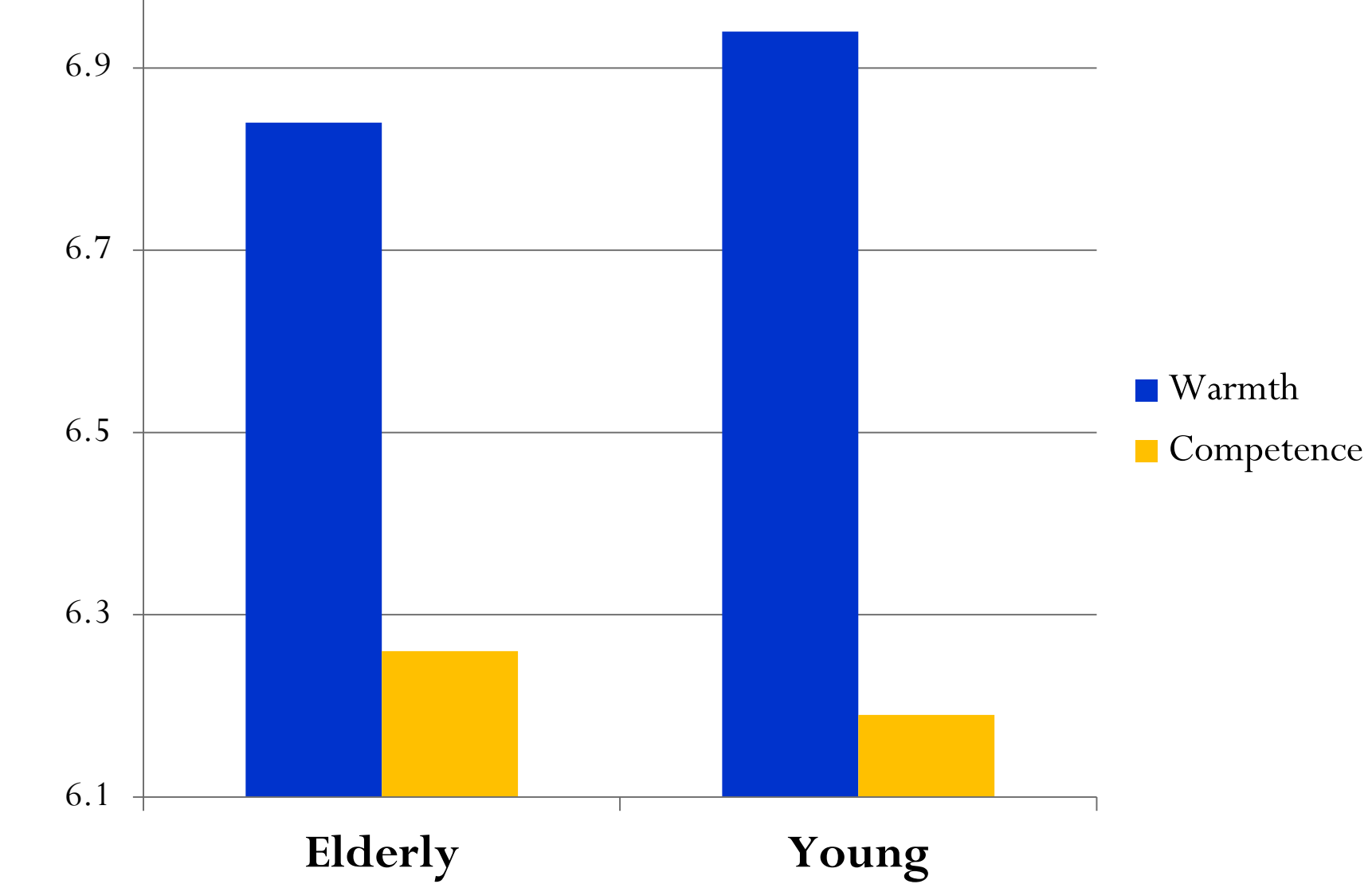
## Results

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test for mean differences in responses. Ratings of the younger adults ( $M = 6.68$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) did not differ from the ratings of the old adults ( $M = 6.64$ ,  $SD = .79$ ),  $F(97) = .08$ ,  $p = .78$ .

Linear Regression was used to test whether participants' attitudes reported on the Aging Opinion Survey predicted their ratings. Our data indicated responses on the aging survey did not influence participants' ratings of the elderly  $F(1, 97) = .41$ ,  $p = .56$ ,  $\beta = -.07$  nor their ratings of the young adults  $F(1, 97) = .01$ ,  $p = .91$ ,  $\beta = -.01$ .

### Additional Analyses

Results did show that age of target individuals moderated ratings of warmth and competence,  $F(1, 97) = 18.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . Young individuals were rated significantly warmer than elderly individuals  $t(97) = -1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $d = .11$ ; whereas elderly individuals were rated slightly more competent than young individuals; however, this difference was not significant  $t(97) = 1.62$ ,  $p = .11$ ,  $d = .07$ .



Additionally, results revealed an interaction between gender and trait dimension such that females were rated significantly warmer ( $M = 6.96$ ,  $SD = .86$ ) than males ( $M = 6.77$ ,  $SD = .84$ ); yet, males were rated significantly more competent ( $M = 6.29$ ,  $SD = .83$ ) than females ( $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = .87$ ),  $F(1, 97) = 41.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ .

## Discussion

The results did not confirm our hypothesis. The data showed that participants rated individuals in the photos in a similar manner, regardless of whether the individuals were young or old. This could be due to the participants trying to respond in a socially desirable manner; perhaps participants didn't want to appear prejudice by rating the older adults in a more negative light. We did, however, find some interesting effects. Participants rated younger individuals as warmer than the older individuals, which might have resulted from feelings of in-group favoritism. Because our participants were young adults, they might have identified with target individuals in their same age category, rating them in a more favorable manner. We also found that the female individuals in the photos were rated as warmer than the males in the photos, whereas the males were rated as more competent than the females. These results are consistent with research on gender stereotypes (e.g., Fiske et al., 2002), showing that, stereotypically, females are seen as more friendly and warm, whereas males are seen as more competent and capable.

## References

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