



A GENERATION SPEAKS OUT: PERCEPTIONS OF AGING IN OLDER ADULTS

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*Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (APA),
Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.A., July, 2004*

This research was funded through a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and a University of British Columbia HSS grant to Dr. Anita M. Hubley.

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, 7 older women and 8 older men born between 1930 and 1945 met separately in a series of focus groups to discuss their views of age. Sessions were audio-taped, transcribed, and analysed for significant themes and issues related to age and aging. Although there was some overlap in the themes raised by the two groups (e.g. future goals, feeling younger than their age), there were also significant differences. For example, the women discussed issues such as their role as pioneers and feelings of invisibility whereas the men tended to compare themselves to others and discussed their sense of discomfort in certain environments. These themes are illustrated with quotations from the participants and then discussed in the context of current literature.

INTRODUCTION

Age identity generally refers to the age or age group that a person or group feels or identifies with rather than the actual number of years lived (Hubley & Hultsch, 1994). Age identity traditionally has been studied using measures such as surveys and self-report questionnaires that reflect the deductive and structural approach to symbolic interactionism of Kuhn and the Iowa School. A greater understanding of age and age identity may be obtained using the inductive and processual approach of Blumer and the Chicago School. Thus, focus groups would better elicit the nature and sources of the meanings that participants attach to age and the conditions under which age become salient than traditional questionnaires (Lindsay & Hubley, in press).

The purpose of the larger study was to re-examine the conceptual structure of age identity by asking community-dwelling men and women comprising four generations (born between 1930 and 1976) to describe what age means to them and how it plays a role (or not) in their lives. Our focus here is the subset of participants comprising the oldest generation.

METHOD

Participants

Participants consisted of 15 older adults (8 men, 7 women) born between 1930 and 1945 (i.e., Depression/WWII era generation). The mean age was 61 years (range: 56-70 years) for the men's group and 63 years (range: 58-71 years) for the women's group. The education level of the sample of men and women was relatively high with 69% of the participants having achieved higher than a Gr. 12

education. Most of the participants were retired (61.5%) but 30.7% of the sample worked part-time and 7.7% worked full-time. Marital status in the sample was varied with 53.8% married/common-law, 23.1% divorced/separated, 15.4% never-married, and 7.7% widowed.

Procedure

Participants formed two gender-based multi-session focus groups. Each attended three 1.5-hour focus groups held one week apart. Sessions were audio-taped. The first session was unstructured to allow for the spontaneous emergence of age-related themes and language. Questions were developed for the second and third sessions based on issues raised in the previous sessions. Participants were also invited to read all transcripts and make corrections or add clarifications.

Analysis

Content analysis was performed on the session transcripts using the qualitative analysis software NVivo 2. Each group was independently coded by two research assistants, and then the two sets of codes were discussed and a final set of codes was achieved by discussion and consensus among all three authors.

RESULTS

The Women



1. This is what being my age is like, and I like it

"I think we all agree we don't feel like we thought we would feel."

"I would look younger, but I wouldn't be younger. No, no. Well this is just fine thank you."

2. There are a lot of positives to being this age and I look forward to the future

"I think there's a certain amount of freedom in having lived however long."

"Because I have an image of how I want to grow old. And I want to ensure that I accomplish that. So this next stage, I am very much looking forward to."

3. Ok, I know my body's changing, but who's that old lady in the mirror?

"I'm not tired, I don't have naps every afternoon, it's just that I've slowed down, maybe. Everything that I'm doing is in much slower motion than I used to do it in."

"Well, you see an outside picture that doesn't really feel like the inside picture... all of a sudden, sometimes you just look in the mirror and catch this picture of someone who actually looks much older than you feel."

4. With any luck I'll stay healthy, but I worry about the alternative

"I really do feel that you could want for your old age to be in a certain mould, but it doesn't mean it will happen."

"Obviously, the ultimate fear is to be a vegetable and to be totally helpless, and have someone look after you. That I would absolutely dread and hate."

5. We were pioneers

"Our age group of women... I think women have done an absolutely outstanding job at making or helping young women to be more than what they were in the past. In other words looking at all parts of what they can offer to society rather than just being, as our mothers were, a wife and a mother."

6. We are now invisible

"You know we've become the invisible majority because the people just don't notice you. They'll overlook you because of your age...because they don't recognize us...and it also extends out to the way the world looks at us too...the marketing is done to the youth...It doesn't speak to us, it's as though we've been neutered."

The Men



1. Why do people think I'm old? I don't feel old

"I get on the bus from time to time. I'm not carrying anything. I'm not bent over or stooped over...and some young people stand up and wanna give me a seat. And there's other older people, significantly older than myself, standing there...it sort of surprised me because I didn't think I really look that senior to them."

"I don't feel, you know, older. Or, if anything, I feel younger than most of my peers."

2. Life's far from over

"I have so many plans that that if I live to be as old as my friend, O.A. - I just went to his 100th birthday - I couldn't possibly entertain them all."

3. I'm still doing all the same things, just not to the same degree

"But physically you can still do what you might have been doing at 40. It just means you don't do it as strongly or go at it as much."

"I have the fear now...I know my range and acceptability of the elements. My range has been lost."

4. Compared to others, I'm still doing great

"With my particular group, I feel I'm more agile than they are. I seem to grasp things...they don't seem to grasp it as quick as I can."

"[Our children's] friends still come and visit us...we'll end up playing a game of tennis and lots of times we'll beat 'em."

5. There are some places that I don't belong anymore

"I would like to go to a rock concert, but...I mean, 30 years younger than me, and I just don't feel comfortable in that situation, unless there's a better mix."

6. The only good old person is one who doesn't seem old

“stooped”, “shuffling”, “clicking dentures”, “grumpy”, “shakiness”, “sallow skin”, “slow on the uptake”, “wrinkled facial appearance” [describing characteristics of an old man].

“No wonder we get it back as feedback sometimes from young people, because we’re guilty ourselves.”

“The guy’s 85 years of age. He looks really sharp and is sharp like a knife. Heck, if I would be like that at 85, I could actually hardly wait.”

DISCUSSION

The results of this study revealed several interesting similarities and discrepancies between the groups of older men and women. A common theme expressed by both groups was that they did not fit the image of ‘old’. Much research has shown that many older individuals feel younger than their chronological age (e.g., Hubley & Hultsch, 1994; Kaufman & Elder, 2002) and avoid categorizing themselves as old (e.g., Logan, Ward, & Spitze, 1992). Notably, men emphasized that they were not old whereas women felt that their reality was a more accurate picture of what being old is today. Both groups identified positive aspects to aging and spoke of having future goals and plans.

Men focused more on what they could, and could no longer, do at their age with an emphasis on the ways in which they had not changed with age. They noted some losses in their physical abilities but also stressed how they were still doing many of the same activities as they had when younger. While this fits with previous research (e.g., Karp, 1988; Sherman, 1994; Thompson et al., 1991), Zebrowitz and Montepare (2000) suggest the continuation of younger activities may reflect an attempt to misidentify with a stigmatized age group. Certainly, the men seemed to struggle more with their age and did not have a positive image of most old (or older) adults. They felt uncomfortable attending events where the majority of people were likely to be young, which Karp (1988) also found in his study of older adults and Zebrowitz and Montepare further suggest is an attempt to combat age stigmas by avoiding situations that make age more salient. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Freund, 1997; Heckhausen & Kruger, 1993), the men also felt they were doing better than many of their same-age peers and, similar to research by Karp (1988) and Sherman (1994), were surprised when younger adults saw them as older.

The women seemed to observe a greater distinction between who they are now and who they were at an earlier age. They described their generation of women (using past tense) as pioneers who played an active role in shaping opportunities for later generations of women, but also felt they currently experienced much invisibility as individuals and as a group. The issue of invisibility has been noted by Pearlman (1993) and Roebuck (1983). Despite this, the women did not want to be younger, a sentiment that contradicts other research (e.g., Hubley & Hultsch, 1994; Kaufman & Elder, 2002). Perhaps this is due to the aspects of self-development, such as greater maturity, feeling more comfortable with themselves, and increased insight and tolerance with age, which they expressed as positives of being their age. Similar positives have been described in the literature on aging (e.g., Furstenberg, 1989; Karp, 1988; Palmore, 1990). Like the men, the women noticed physical changes. However, only the women discussed their fear of becoming incapacitated and dependent in old age, a fear also noted by Furstenberg, Pearlman, and by Thompson et al. (1991). Furthermore, it was only the women who used the striking image of the mirror to describe the discontinuity that Karp, Sherman (1994), and Thompson et al. describe between the internal image of oneself and the physical exterior, a concept that Pearlman (1993) referred to as ‘late mid-life astonishment’.

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