

# Have College Students' Attitudes Toward Older People Changed?

**Susan J. Schwalb** Counseling Center, University of Maryland

**William E. Sedlacek** Counseling Center, University of Maryland

*Attitudes toward age were assessed in 1979 and again in 1988. MANOVA results indicated that older people are still not equally accepted in many situations.*

In recent years, increased attention has been paid toward older people and their role in our society. Much of the discussion has focused on an increased sensitivity toward age issues. Yet popular media expose us to older people on a daily basis, representing them most often as negative and stereotypic. Older people are underrepresented in commercials and when they are featured, they are portrayed as "young-old" (rarely bald or wrinkled). When portrayed as characters, they are given nondescript roles. Only 1% of television portrayals provide an overt positive view of being old (Hiemstra, Goodman, Middlemiss, Vosco, & Ziegler, 1983).

Increased representation of older people in our society has coincided with an increase in researching attitudes toward older people (Celio, Sedlacek, & Schlossberg, 1977; Peabody & Sedlacek, 1982). As a result of the increased attention toward age issues, it is possible that age stereotyping has declined. It is also possible that it has merely become more difficult to document.

Prejudice toward older people has been studied in a variety of settings. Often in job-interviewing situations, prejudicial attitudes are exposed. Gordon, Rozelle, and Baxter (1988) had participants rate male and female job applicants. The applicants were role-played, unbeknownst to the participants. When participants were asked for their impressions, they decreased

their ratings of older applicants and increased their ratings of younger applicants. Similarly, Singer (1986) found that participants rated a 55-year-old man more negatively than they rated a 30-year-old man on a variety of work dimensions in five different professions.

Further evidence exists for age-associated prejudice. In his review of the literature on perceptions of old people, McTavish (1971) found that they are generally perceived as ill, tired, mentally slower, not sexual, forgetful, withdrawn, unproductive, grouchy, and defensive. Kite and Johnson (1988) conducted a meta-analysis that covered literature through 1985 and found that attitudes toward older people were more negative than were attitudes toward young adults.

Concurrently, there has been an increased enrollment of older students on college campuses (Levin, 1988; Martin, 1988). Research done on college populations has also found negative attitudes toward older people. Peabody and Sedlacek (1982) used the *Situational Attitude Scale-Age (SAS-A)* to identify hidden attitudes of college students toward older people in a variety of situations. Their results indicated that the most negative attitudes were expressed in close social situations with older people. Academic situations yielded slightly fewer negative attitudes toward older people. Levin (1988) found strong and consistent age stereotyping by college students against older men.

With the increase in research on ageism, it has been more apparent that *older people* is a difficult term to define. Celio et al. (1977) noted that this term does not refer to a unitary construct. Therefore, research in this area becomes confusing because it may not always be dealing with the same idea of *older people*. Typically, terms such as *old* and *elderly* are not useful because they have varying connotations associated with them.

---

Susan J. Schwalb is a graduate research assistant and William E. Sedlacek is the Director of the Testing, Research, and Data Processing Unit. Both can be contacted at the Counseling Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.

Also of concern is the limited scope of the research in this area. Research has involved small specific populations or has concerned negative attitudes in limited situations. Ageism, however, is a broader concept referring to all situations in which persons receive differential treatment because of their ages. If ageism is a widespread concern, then a broader look at the issue is necessary. For this reason, a study concerning how attitudes evolve over time is meaningful. The question we raise, therefore, is whether or not negative attitudes persist over time. The answer will provide an understanding of how pervasive the problem of ageism is.

## METHOD

The version of the SAS-A used in the current study is a revision of the original instrument (Celio et al., 1977). Ten situations relevant to college student life were created. For each situation, 10 bipolar sets of descriptive words follow. Students reacted on a Semantic Differential scale to all 10 pairs of words in each situation, making a total of 100 responses. Two separate forms were developed (see Appendix A). The forms differed only on whether or not a specific age was attached to the situation. Form A was the control situation with no specific age mentioned. Form B was experimental in that a specific age was mentioned in each situation. A variety of ages were used here, as well as in the original study, to look at the broad notion of ageism. Different situations might have different age stereotypes associated with them.

The data were collected in 1979 as part of a previous study (Peabody & Sedlacek, 1982) and again in 1988. For both years, data were collected during the summer freshman orientation program at a large eastern university. The total sample consisted of 412 students. In 1979, 53% of the students were women and 47% were men. In 1988, 49% were women and 51% were men. The mean age was 18 years. Forms were randomly assigned to students. Thus any difference in mean response would be the result of insertion of age in the situation because all other aspects of the measure and method were the same.

Results were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) at the .05 level with year (1979 versus 1988) and sex as main effects.

## RESULTS

The reliability of the SAS-A (coefficient alpha) ranged from .65 to .89 across the situations, with a median reliability of .81. Table 1 shows the results of *F* tests by year, sex, and form. Table 2 shows the means for each of these situations by year, sex, and form. In the majority of situations (6 of 10 in 1979, 7 of 10 in 1988), students held negative attitudes toward the age-specific "older" people.

The three situations showed effects by year. Regardless of form or sex, students in 1988 tended to feel more positively toward situations 8 (breaking into line), 9 (applying for a job), and 10 (competition for a date) than did students in 1979.

In 7 out of 10 of the situations, the students responded differently depending on the form that they had. Six of these situations indicated that students had negative attitudes toward older people: a new 50-year-old roommate, a 35-year-old blind date, a 50-year-old lab partner, a 30-year-old student trying out for intramurals, a 40-year-old pledge of a sorority or fraternity, and a 30-year-old study partner. Only in the situation of a 65 year old breaking into line, as compared with the other items, were attitudes more positive toward the older person.

Sex differences were found in three situations. Women held more negative views about being assigned a study partner and having a blind date, whereas men held more negative views of someone trying out for their intramural team.

Effects of sex by form were significant for two situations: someone pledging your fraternity

**TABLE 1**  
**Probabilities of *F* Values by Year, Form, and Sex for Each SAS-A Situation**

Situation"	Effects Significant"
1. New roommate	F
2. Blind date	F, S
3. Lab partner	F
4. Orientation advisor	None
5. Intramurals	F, S
6. New pledge	F, S x F
7. Study partner	F, S
8. Movie ticket line	Y, F, S x F
9. Job competitor	Y
10. Date competition	Y

\*See appendix for complete situations.

\*\*Y = Year, F = Form, S = Sex.

**TABLE 2**  
**Means and Standard Deviations by Year, Form, and Sex For SAS-A Situations**

*Item No.	Form A						Form B						Year Total	
	Men		Women		Total		Men		Women		Total			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>1979</b>														
1.	26.00	3.99	25.56	4.78	25.77	4.41	34.40	6.02	36.09	8.80	35.30	7.64	30.12	7.90
2.	23.57	4.82	25.62	5.98	24.64	5.53	30.62	6.55	32.03	7.80	31.38	7.29	28.14	7.29
3.	24.46	5.58	22.70	4.97	23.54	5.32	26.16	6.59	27.06	6.88	26.64	6.73	25.16	6.28
4.	25.53	4.17	25.29	4.53	25.40	4.34	24.18	5.41	24.70	6.52	24.46	6.01	24.91	5.28
5.	24.38	5.69	21.78	6.13	23.00	6.03	26.57	7.47	25.35	6.33	25.92	6.88	24.53	6.63
6.	24.70	5.76	20.80	5.54	22.67	5.95	29.41	9.29	30.38	8.29	29.93	8.73	26.48	8.36
7.	22.14	6.17	19.78	6.88	20.91	6.62	24.14	7.81	22.62	7.30	23.34	7.55	22.17	7.20
8.	38.25	6.01	39.26	5.17	38.78	5.58	39.80	6.81	36.18	7.48	37.87	7.37	38.30	6.57
9.	28.57	4.68	28.08	5.52	28.31	5.12	28.92	5.87	29.10	5.92	29.05	5.87	28.69	5.52
10.	37.13	7.06	37.74	7.69	37.45	7.36	36.40	9.90	36.88	7.48	36.65	8.65	37.03	8.05
<b>1988</b>														
1.	24.10	5.27	25.70	4.81	24.96	5.06	34.20	6.38	33.46	9.18	33.88	7.68	29.42	7.88
2.	24.81	5.65	26.65	5.34	25.81	5.53	30.98	7.19	34.67	6.54	32.59	7.11	29.20	7.21
3.	23.78	5.84	24.26	5.59	24.04	5.68	28.71	6.66	25.96	5.66	27.51	6.36	25.78	6.26
4.	23.54	4.75	25.54	4.95	24.62	5.68	23.80	5.68	24.08	6.36	23.92	5.94	24.27	5.45
5.	23.03	6.79	23.48	6.47	23.27	6.58	28.25	4.94	25.70	6.16	27.14	5.62	25.21	6.40
6.	24.56	5.36	23.28	7.86	23.87	6.65	29.39	4.77	31.93	6.76	30.50	5.93	27.18	7.10
7.	22.18	6.30	21.49	7.05	21.80	6.69	25.77	6.63	24.10	6.26	25.04	6.49	23.42	6.77
8.	37.51	5.73	38.30	5.89	37.94	5.80	35.92	5.49	34.83	5.70	35.46	5.57	36.69	5.81
9.	26.10	5.06	28.44	5.60	27.36	5.45	27.09	5.40	27.00	4.30	27.05	4.92	27.20	5.18
10.	35.74	6.70	36.11	6.47	35.94	6.47	35.03	7.27	34.02	7.45	34.59	7.32	35.26	6.93

\*See appendix for complete situations.

or sorority and someone breaking into line at the movies. In the first situation, women were more positive than were men when age was not noted, but when reacting to the same situation when the individual was 40 years old, women responded more negatively than men did. In the situation of having someone break into line at the movies when age was not noted, women were less tolerant than were men. When the situation described an older person breaking into line, however, women were more tolerant than were men.

The interactions of form by year and sex by year were not significant.

## DISCUSSION

Overall attitudes of college students toward older people were generally negative in both the 1979 and 1988 samples. For most situations, college students had different attitudes toward older people than they did toward age-

unspecified persons. Students felt negatively toward older persons in academic situations (study group and lab partners) as well as in social situations. Only the situation of breaking in line resulted in more positive attitudes toward older people, indicating that students thought that this situation was more acceptable for a 65 year old than for a younger person. It is likely that the 65 year old was eliciting a reverse prejudice in that students felt sympathy or pity toward him or her. In the situations of orientation advisor and job applicant, attitudes did not differ for older people, perhaps indicating that age is not salient in these situations for the specific ages stated in the situations.

Although students in 1988 expressed more positive attitudes toward the situations regardless of form or sex, the differences on form and the lack of form by year interactions are the findings that lead us to conclude that students hold the same basically negative attitudes toward older people over the period studied. Over-

all, the 1988 sample, as compared with the 1979 sample, responded more positively on all forms, indicating more positive emotions in all situations. The 1988 sample, however, still held significantly more negative attitudes toward the age-specific situations, as compared with the 1979 sample. Although the 1988 students may be less critical of all situations and all types of people, they still expressed more negative attitudes for the age-specific situations than they did for those in which age was not specified. Therefore, it is of great concern that ageist attitudes are still so widely held on college campuses.

Women differed from men in three of the social situations. This pattern seems to indicate that social norms are different for men and women. The groups had different situations that were significantly more negative for them. For example, women were more threatened by the blind date situation, whereas men were more negative toward someone joining their intramural team. The purpose of examining gender differences was to make a complete comparison of the 1979 and 1988 samples. What is of interest is that some of the situations that revealed gender differences in 1979 are different than those revealing gender differences in 1988. Whether or not these are important differences or indicative of trends warrants further exploration. It is worth noting that fewer situations elicited gender differences today than in 1979, indicating that men and women hold more similar attitudes today than they did 10 years ago.

Although ageist attitudes were found in a variety of situations over the 10-year period, for men and women, one caveat is in order. In both studies, different ages were used to examine ageism over a variety of ages and situations. There is concern that using different ages makes it harder to attribute the change in attitudes to specifying an age. In essence, two things varied: presence or absence of information and using different ages. Future research in this area should involve the examination of different ages separately to clarify this concern.

The generally negative assessment of older people has implications for the college community as a whole. With the increased population of older college students on campus, every effort should be made to create an environment for older students that is at least equal to that of traditional college students. Amir (1969) in his summary of the literature on the effects of contact among different groups concluded that

contact alone does not necessarily reduce prejudice. There must be some attempt to provide positive interactions in which both groups think they have something to gain.

Although there is increased publicity and concern over the rights of older persons in our society, attitudes do not seem to be changing. Awareness of ageism (differential treatment based on age) without education or programming to increase sensitivity, as these results indicate, does not effect change. College communities need to make greater efforts to educate the general campus population about ageism through workshops and within regular coursework. Courses that view ageism as one of many *isms* provide insight into the overall nature of prejudice and therefore enlighten students to the concerns of older people as well as concerns of other oppressed groups. This approach has been shown to be effective in orientation programs (Sedlacek, Troy, & Chapman, 1976) and in classroom settings (Roper & Sedlacek, 1988).

Other concrete approaches to combatting "isms" are found in Sedlacek and Brooks (1976), who outline a series of steps in dealing with prejudices. These steps include information, assessment of attitudes, role-playing, examining sources of attitudes, and generating experiences that reduce ageism such as maintaining a diverse student population to allow for natural contact among groups, exposing students to accomplished older persons to foster an understanding of the potential of older people in our society, and hosting conferences and workshops on the subject, thus allowing for follow-up sessions for student reactions to the programs. These kinds of active approaches must be used if college student attitudes are to improve toward older people.

With most prejudices, people have the leisure of never having to confront their negative views. If they choose, they can avoid the issue forever. Because all people age, however, there is necessarily a need to deal with the issues of aging. University communities should help students confront their concerns about older people because this is an issue for all students.

## REFERENCES

- Amir, Y. (1969). Contact hypothesis in ethnic relations. *Psychological Bulletin*, 71, 319-342.

- Celio, M. B., Sedlacek, W. E., & Schlossberg, N. K. (1977). *The development of a measure of attitudes toward age* (Research Rep. No. 8-77). College Park, MD: University of Maryland, Counseling Center.
- Gordon, R. A., Rozelle, R. M., & Baxter, J. C. (1988). The effect of applicant age, job level, and accountability on the evaluation of job applicants. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 41, 20-33.
- Hiemstra, R., Goodman, M., Middlemiss, M. A., Vosco, R., & Ziegler, N. (1983). How older persons are portrayed in television advertising: Implications for educators. *Educational Gerontology*, 9, 111-121.
- Kite, M. E., Johnson, B. T. (1988). Attitudes toward older and younger adults: A meta-analysis. *Psychology and Aging*, 3, 233-244.
- Levin, W. C. (1988). Age stereotyping. *Research on Aging*, 10, 134-148.
- Martin, J. Y. (1988). Meeting nontraditional students halfway. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 29, 369-371.
- McTavish, D. G. (1971). Perceptions of old people: A review of research methods and findings. *Gerontologist*, 11, 90-101.
- Peabody, S. A., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1982). Attitudes of younger university students toward older students. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 23, 140-143.
- Roper, L. D., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1988). Student affairs professionals in academic roles: A course on racism. *National Association of Student Personnel Administrators*, 26, 27-32.
- Sedlacek, W. E., & Brooks, G. C., Jr. (1976). *Racism in American Education: A Model for Change*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Sedlacek, W. E., Troy, W. G., & Chapman, T. H. (1976). An evaluation of three methods of racism-sexism training. *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 55, 196-198.
- Singer, M. S. (1986). Age stereotypes as a function of profession. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 126, 691-692.

## APPENDIX A

### Instructions

This questionnaire measures how people think and feel about a number of social and personal incidents and situations. It is not a test so there are no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire is anonymous so please **DO NOT SIGN YOUR NAME**.

Each item or situation is followed by 10 descriptive word scales. Your task is to select, for each descriptive scale, the rating that best described **YOUR** feelings toward the item.

*Sample item:* Starting school this fall  
happy ABCDE sad

You would indicate the direction and extent of your feeling (e.g., you might select (B) by indicating your choice (B) on your response sheet

by blackening in the appropriate space for that word scale. **DO NOT MARK ON THE BOOKLET. PLEASE RESPOND TO ALL WORD SCALES.**

Sometimes you may feel as though you had the same item before on the questionnaire. This will not be the case, so **DO NOT LOOK BACK AND FORTH** through the items. Do not try to remember how you checked similar items earlier in the questionnaire. **MAKE EACH ITEM A SEPARATE AND INDEPENDENT JUDGMENT.** Respond as honestly as possible without puzzling over individual items. Respond with your first impression whenever possible.

### Situations

#### Form A

1. You meet your new roommate.
2. Your blind date turns out to be a freshman.
3. You begin work with your lab partner in a course.
4. You meet your freshman orientation advisor.
5. A student tries out for your intramural team.
6. A student pledges your fraternity/sorority.
7. A student from one of your courses asks to study with you.
8. You are standing in line for movie tickets and someone breaks in line ahead of you.
9. You are applying for a highly competitive job and you meet your new major competitor before the final interview.
10. You learn that there is competition for someone you want to date.

#### Form B

1. You meet your new 50-year-old roommate.
2. Your blind date turns out to be a 30-year-old freshman.
3. You begin work with your 50-year-old lab partner in a course.
4. You meet your 40-year-old freshman orientation advisor.
5. A 30-year-old student tries out for your intramural team.
6. A 40-year-old student pledges your fraternity/sorority.
7. A 30-year-old student from one of your courses asks to study with you.

8. You are standing in line for movie tickets and a 65-year-old person breaks in line ahead of you.
9. You are applying for a highly competitive job and you meet your major competitor, who is a 55 year old, before the final interview.
10. You learn that your competition for someone you want to date is 45 years old.