

Making Sense of Patronizing Speech: Examining Elderly Perceptions of Intergenerational Communication

Jessie Pierquet

Faculty Sponsor: Linda Dickmeyer, Department of Communication Studies

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the interpretation of patronizing speech by the elderly in intergenerational encounters. Extending from past research, this study was conducted to determine whether or not the elderly interpret communication with younger generations as patronizing in regards to their own personal lives, and if so, how these encounters affect them. Ten participants from a current events class at the South Side Neighborhood Center were chosen as participants for this study. Interviews were conducted to find their interpretations of patronizing speech and how it influences their intergenerational relationships. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the data received from the interviews. Thematic analysis was then conducted using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) Constant Comparative Analysis to provide the foundation for determining themes that arose from the data. Four themes regarding the research questions were uncovered; messages of disrespect, perceptions of being a 'non-something,' patronization as dependent upon circumstances, and no messages of patronization.

INTRODUCTION

The elderly population of the world is steadily growing. Between the years 2000 and 2010, the population of those 65 years and over is projected to increase 24 percent. Today, more than 10 million elderly over 80 years old are currently living in the United States, with another 9 million expected between 2004 and 2030 (Kinsella & Phillips, 2005). This increase of elderly in the population allows more intergenerational encounters to occur both within families and in the greater community. For this reason, there is a need for understanding the differences in interpretation of communication between generations.

As their numbers continue to rise, the elderly population needs to be seen as a vital part of the community, and in order for that to occur, the effects of patronizing speech on them need to be understood. A reported "double standard" exists concerning the stereotyping of the elderly. At the same time, the elderly are perceived positively, as warm, and negatively, as incompetent. Therefore, "people feel both pity and admiration toward [the] elderly," (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005, p. 278). Stereotyping the elderly as all being warm or all being incompetent does affect them and leads to internal attributes that influence their "self-evaluations." Even if they do not believe they are true for themselves, the elderly do believe stereotypes about others in their peer group (Rothermund & Brandtstadter, 2003).

How people construct their environment has a direct effect on how they interpret communication. In order for two individuals to communicate effectively, they need to come to some type of agreement or shared meaning within the communication climate (Miller, 2002). Individual differences can create problems when it comes to establishing this common ground and can lead to a break down in communication. Particularly, the age of participants in conversations has been examined in past research to identify differences in interpretations of patronizing speech and one's response to it (Harwood, Giles, Fox, Ryan, & Williams, 1993; Thimm, Rademacher, & Kruse, 1998; Harwood, Ryan, Giles, & Tysoski, 1997). This research primarily deals with bystanders' perspective of patronizing speech, and does not provide information on how the individual being patronized feels or how they interpret the communication. Most often, the target of patronizing speech is the elderly. Because of this, intergenerational relationships also need to be examined in terms of patronization and level of satisfaction within in the relationship (Bettini & Norton, 1991).

This paper will continue to look at the role of patronizing speech in intergenerational communication and its direct effect on the elderly. Elderly stereotypes and patronizing speech will be discussed, as well as intergenerational relationships, and sensemaking as a theory to explain elderly perceptions of their environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the elderly population has been conducted for many years and includes an expansive array of topics. This review will focus on those topics most relevant to the present research.

Elderly Stereotypes & Patronizing Speech

Stereotypes have been defined as cognitive representations that are based on an individual's characteristics (Macrae, Stangor, & Hewstone, 1996). These stereotypes lead to the use of patronizing speech in the form of simplified grammar and vocabulary, exaggerated intonation, and terms of endearment (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986). Patronizing another person involves treating them as less capable and with less regard for their wants, needs, and beliefs "in a way that is belittling, condescending, or demeaning" (Adler, 2001, p. 621). This is done with positive intentions on behalf of the one patronizing. Finally, for communication to be interpreted as patronizing, the "victim" must be aware of being patronized. Therefore, one's actions may be patronizing, without being labeled as such by the target.

Changes that occur with aging may hinder the ability for the elderly to create intergenerational relationships and lead to the enforcement of already established stereotypes. Natural deficiencies in cognition, perception, and memory of the elderly lead to difficulty in decoding nonverbals, inability to detect conversational pauses that are used as cues, and a harder time with word retrieval and sentence structure (Lieberman, Rigo, & Campaign, 1988; Pichora-Fuller & Souza, 2003; Busacco, 1999). Key characteristics have been targeted as predictors of stereotyping. Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert (2005) found that the health of an elderly person may "trump other variables" that may lead to stereotyping (p. 282). Cognitive complexity, physique, personal appearance, and type of relationship are the other variables that, if present, also contribute to stereotyping.

Regardless of its prevalence, patronizing speech *is* considered socially inappropriate by most, but in some cases can also be seen as helpful (Giles, Fox, & Smith, 1993). Patronizers may sometimes have good intentions and may use patronizing speech to aid the communication process (Thimm et al., 1998). However, those who use patronizing speech are viewed more negatively than those using "natural" speech and are viewed as less competent and less intelligent (Harwood et al., 1997; Harwood et al., 1993; Giles et al., 1993).

Although the elderly may be predisposed to stereotyping, the effects can be somewhat reduced. Thimm et al., (1998) found that if a positive description (socially active, competent, etc.) of an elderly person is given, there is a better chance of them being talked to in a less patronizing way.

There are also a number of ways an elderly person can respond to patronizing speech. Responding in a cooperative manner suggests blame taking, while using a more assertive response style makes the elderly person appear more competent, but also disrespectful. If the elderly ignore patronizing speech they may also be seen as accepting the stereotypes, and therefore reinforcing the patronizing speech (Harwood et al., 1997). Using a patient-client vignette, Harwood et al. (1993) found that elderly clients who used the assertive response were perceived as higher status, more controlling and less nurturing, and were seen as less satisfied with the interaction. However, it is still recommended that the elderly use an assertive response style because it moves them away from the more nurturing role and the stereotypes that lead to patronizing speech.

Patronization as discussed is a problem that extends across cultures and generations. Adler (2001) believes this is the result of a fixation on group membership and its unavoidable character. People are not seen as individuals but rather as a member of a group. The elderly are not seen as individually unique, but lumped into the gloomy category of "the old" and are granted all of the assumed characteristics of that group. Society also upholds helping behavior or to "extend ourselves" when someone is in need (p. 631). In the course of daily life, Adler (2001) believes it is hard for individuals to discern what discourse may be interpreted as patronizing. However, one cannot hide behind this excuse for long. One must learn from their encounters and choose to act differently in the future.

Intergenerational Relationships

Intergenerational relationships exist both inside and outside of the family. Grandparents, parents, and children all have the ability to forge relationships between generations. The term intergenerational generally refers to the involvement of any two generations (Agnes, 2000). In the interest of convenience, most research has been conducted using elderly and non-relative young adult subjects (usually college students). Surprisingly, Bettini & Norton (1991) found that 85% of the elderly in their study reported having non-relative young adults as friends. However, the means of acquiring these friends and the functions of the relationships were very different from same-age friendships

The benefits of non-relative same-age friendships include helping the elderly remain socially active and giving them an opportunity to self-disclose to an individual not in their family (Nussbaum, 1983). These friendships are seen as vital to the satisfaction of the elderly. On the other hand, intergenerational friendships seem to “fulfill more instrumental functions than socio-emotional ones” with the younger participant (relative or non-relative) receiving the most benefit (Bettini & Norton, 1991, p. 70). In a study conducted by Cai, Giles & Noels (1998), Chinese elderly reported negative views of non-family young adults, viewing the young adults as less accommodating than older adults. However, this may be due to the highly collectivistic nature of the Chinese culture and the strong family ties that result.

The grandparent-grandchild relationship has been researched as a specific intergenerational phenomenon that can aid in understanding the importance of intergenerational friendships to the elderly. Harwood and Lin’s (2000) research allowed for a rare look into how the elderly themselves feel about their relationships with their grandchildren. Using questionnaires, they uncovered four themes inherent in this kind of relationship; affiliation, pride, exchange, and distance. There was “overwhelming positivity” in the responses of the elderly, reporting great pleasure in their relationship with their grandchildren (p. 41). One negative result did however show a lack of intimacy due to physical distance between the grandparent and grandchild.

In general, there is a lack of opportunities for the elderly and young adults to meet and establish relationships. Most non-relative intergenerational friendships reported by the elderly are established through their children, church, or grandchildren, and may actually be more like acquaintances than friends (Bettini & Norton, 1991). When grandparents do spend time with their grandchildren, it is most often in a family situation with middle generations present, which prevents depth of conversation (Harwood & Lin, 2000). These days, the television offers young adults the majority of their contact with the elderly and “serves as one of the major sources for age-role socialization” (Signorielli, 2004, p. 280) and “provides one of the few easily accessible sources of information about aging and becoming old” (p. 297). Unfortunately, television does not always portray the elderly in the most realistic manner, and may actually contribute to age stereotypes.

Teachers are now starting to take matters into their own hands by allowing a new wave of researchers into their classrooms who are trying to show the benefits children gain from repeated exposure to the elderly. In their study, Bales, Eklund, and Siffin (2000) recorded children’s perceptions of the elderly before and after elderly interaction in the classroom. Their results show that “positive, continuing contact with elders in intergenerational programs can help children view old people more positively and less negatively” (p. 688). What this study does not include is the elderly participant’s perception of their interaction with the students. The elderly still have not been directly asked how they explain intergenerational communication or how they make sense of their encounters with younger generations. Using Sensemaking Theory will help in answering this question.

Sensemaking Theory

Karl Weick (1995) is the originator of Sensemaking Theory, which was featured in his book, *Sensemaking in Organizations*. The idea of sensemaking changed the way in which the work environment was viewed, offering the idea of “organizing and communicating as intertwined processes that continually and mutually influence each other” (Miller, 2002, p. 198).

Sensemaking is a dynamic process that uses one’s own experience and personal framework to filter information into a conceivable form (Miller, 2002). Reality is created as a team, with each person in the interaction linked to the other, with their own beliefs and experiences influencing them (Murphy, 2001). This is an on going process of creating meaning that constantly changes as people go about their daily routines (Mills, 2002). Therefore, people are seen as actively constructing their environments (Weick, 1995).

When communicating, individuals group together certain elements in their environment that determine how they view an event. These views will affect one’s behavior, and thus the people around them. This process of grouping is called enactment, and is the first step in the sensemaking process (Miller, 2002). The goal of the second step, selection, is to reduce equivocality. This term refers to “the existence of multiple interpretations of the same event” and is done by sifting through elements encountered and organizing them to create meaning and understanding (p. 199). Shared meaning cannot occur without reduction of equivocality. Also during the selection process, “recipes” are created that map out observed behavior and allow one to act with an appropriate response. These recipes are then used in the final step in sensemaking, retention, where they are stored for future use as “casual maps” (p. 200).

Casual maps can be created at any time, but the more pressure an individual is under, the more likely they are to use an already established casual map (Murphy, 2001). Just because a casual map exists for a certain situation, it does not mean it is an appropriate way to respond or the only way to respond (Miller, 2002). When an environment

becomes too strict, it becomes difficult to face new tasks. In these instances, messages can easily overload a person and lead to misunderstanding or a decline in meaning (Murphy, 2001).

Sensemaking is most often used concerning organizational settings where it is used in understanding how employees make sense of communication in the workplace (Mills, 2002). However, the concept of map making can be applied to a plethora of environments and interactions, including intergenerational contexts. For example, Eddy (2003) used sensemaking theory in researching reactions to change on college campuses. He found that individuals interpreted or made sense of the change their campus went through depending on the college president's understanding of campus issues. The Presidents' understanding was dispersed through various media, which allowed them to "actively construct the reality for the campus" (p. 469).

Sensemaking Theory has also been used to explain the motivation of volunteers. Liao-Troth & Dunn (1999) believe that in order for managers to be effective they must understand what drives their volunteers. Fortunately for the managers, they also found that "managers make sense of volunteer motivation in the same way that volunteers do" (p. 358). Similar to this study, in order for younger people to respond and interact appropriately with the elderly, they must first understand how the elderly person makes sense of the younger generation's actions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Stereotypes exist for all ages and influence the way in which people communicate with each other. For the elderly, the use of patronizing speech has been found prevalent in society and hinders the creation of intergenerational relationships.

The context of when, where, and how patronizing speech occurs has been widely ignored in research and needs to be addressed in a more "naturalistic setting" (Harwood et al., 1993, p. 224). In order to bridge the gap between the elderly and young adults, there needs to be an understanding of the direct effects of patronizing speech on the elderly and the elderly person's interpretation of how patronizing speech manifests itself. Sensemaking will aid this identification process by providing a glimpse into the elderly person's reality. Three research questions have been developed to help show how patronizing speech is evident in the elderly population.

RQ₁: What, if any, messages of patronization do elderly report in their intergenerational interactions?

RQ₂: How do the elderly react to patronizing speech when detected?

RQ₃: How do the elderly interpretations of patronizing speech affect their intergenerational relationships?

METHOD

This study is qualitative in nature, which allowed for an in-depth investigation of the relationship between patronizing speech and the elderly to "provide a richer understanding of this important [kind of] relationship" (Harwood & Lin, 2000, p. 34). This resulted in descriptive empirical research, or data that describes the observable event of patronizing speech. A qualitative approach was most appropriate because the experience of patronizing speech came directly from the voices of the participants.

Interview analysis was conducted in order to acquire data. Interviews are valuable because they can generate more information about a given topic and explore possible reasons behind communication (Reinard, 2001). Specifically, open-ended interviewing allows the researcher to uncover the participant's worldviews, without leading them to answer in a specific way. For this reason, a general interview guide approach was used to outline the broad areas to be discussed with each participant, and yet allowed the researcher to adapt the interview and probe further with certain participants (Patton, 1990). Interviews have been used in the past to discover how the elderly feel about intergenerational communication. The participants in Harwood, McKee and Lin's (2000) study were asked to discuss imagined conversations in scenarios provided by the researcher. The present study avoided this kind of questioning and instead focused purely on actual conversations and encounters the elderly participants have had.

Participants

Ten participants were interviewed for this study, including eight females and two males. Their ages ranged from 65 to 87 years old, with an average age of 75 years. Nonrandom-purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, only nonrandom sampling could be used, and purposive sampling was needed because of the specific age range required for the participants (Reinard, 2001). Because this study involves intergenerational communication, it was important that the participants have access to members of younger generations and be able to communicate effectively. This age range was chosen to allow for the most levels of intergenerational contact and permit a distinct difference from those who are not yet of retirement age. All participants were healthy and capable of recalling information on their own.

Interviews

A general interview guide approach was used to obtain data for this study. This was to ensure specific questions were asked by the researcher, while maintaining general consistency between interviews. Open-ended questions were asked, allowing the participants to reflect their distinct points of view without researcher interference (Patton, 1990). Interviews were useful for this study because they allowed for the participants' own understanding of patronizing speech to be heard in their own words.

Questions were first asked regarding their intergenerational relationships, including related and non-related friends. These relationships were then compared with their same-age friends, including discussion about what they talk about with each group and what the benefits from these relationships are. The term patronizing speech was not used by the interviewer. Instead, participants were asked to describe instances when they felt they were treated differently based on their age or talked down to by those younger than themselves

Procedures

A presentation explaining this study took place upon IRB approval at The South Side Neighborhood Center during a Current Events class. This class was chosen because it is tailored for the elderly population. Students who were interested in participating signed up and were contacted by the researcher to set up interview times for a later date. In addition, the researcher recruited volunteers through her network, including older family members. Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the subjects in either the Neighborhood Center or the participant's home.

Upon arriving for their interview, subjects were presented with a voluntary consent form, at which time the researcher answered any questions the participant may have had. This form included consent for the use of an audio recording device during the interview. All recordings were destroyed upon completion of the study. The interview then took place and generally lasted for thirty minutes.

Data Analysis

The data was transcribed and notes were examined for a qualitative analysis. Through this process, emerging themes regarding patronizing speech and the elderly were noted. A thematic analysis was most appropriate to examine patronizing speech as related to the elderly because it was able to pinpoint common aspects important to the participants. The researcher used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) Constant Comparative Analysis as a method for finding the themes that emerged. This method involves four steps that systematically confine broad themes into precise categories, while avoiding the potential problem of researcher bias.

RESULTS

The interviews resulted in 278 messages. From these messages, emerged answers pertaining to each research questions as well as to additional questions asked. Four central themes in accordance with research question one were identified by the researcher. These themes resulted from the messages, if any, the elderly reported as patronizing speech from younger generations (see Table 1).

Table 1. Emergent themes regarding elderly report of patronizing speech

1	Messages of Disrespect
2	Perceptions of Being a "Non-Something"
3	Patronization as Dependent Upon Circumstances
4	No messages of Patronization

These mutually exclusive themes were composed from ten messages received through the interviews, reflecting the participants' personal experience with being treated differently because of their age. The following will discuss these four themes using examples and quotes from the participants to explain how these themes materialized.

Messages of Disrespect

Many of the elderly reported not having the proper amount of respect from the younger generations. Because of their age, the elderly believe they are entitled to a certain amount of reverence. Beth believes younger people she knows take advantage of her and that it is her money they are interested in. She believes she is not valued as a person, but as an easy target to be taken advantage of. This disrespect is also seen through being over protected.

Paula has recently noticed her children starting to keep things from her in order to protect her. She hates it because she sees herself as an equal, not as something weak that needs protection.

Perceptions of Being a “Non-Something”

Perhaps the most alarming finding reported by the elderly was the message of feeling worthless. For Laura, this idea took the shape of dismissive behavior. She says, “I think as you get older some people tend to dismiss your ideas.” She believes this is the result of being retired and that once retired you have “lost your professional identity” and therefore, lose your credibility. Paula agreed with this by saying “as you get older sometimes people don’t look at you,” resulting in feeling like a “non-something.” This “non-something” is similar to the notion of being ignored and connects back to the feeling of worthlessness.

Patronization as Dependent Upon Circumstances

The elderly also reported being patronized in regards to certain situations, like after a death of a spouse. In these situations, the elderly reported either being coddled or once again ignored. For example, after the death of her husband, Deanne recognized her children as being more watchful of her. Jane also experienced this after the death of her husband, but there came a point when she had to ask her children to stop. Because of their retired nature, Laura again says that depending on the topic of discussion, she will either be listened to or ignored depending on the amount of authority she has over the topic. When dealing with her children, Laura says they sometimes dismiss her opinions because she is “out of the loop,” referring to her lack of engagement in world issues.

No Messages of Patronization

Five out of the ten participants interviewed did not report any instances of patronization. However, these answers were not all definitive and often included the tag “well maybe I am, but I don’t know.” Most agreed that it does happen but that they do not notice. Others like Paula said that she had not felt patronized, but at the same time contradicted herself by giving an example of her children patronizing her.

The second research question asks how the elderly deal with patronizing speech from younger generations when detected. Those who did not think they experienced patronization believed that the reason they do not experience it is because they surround themselves with people who treat them as equals. Because only half of the participants reported being patronized, limited reactions were reported. Two themes emerged from the interviews (see Table 2).

Table 2. Emergent themes regarding elderly responses to patronization

1	“I Ignore It”
2	Self Blame

“I Ignore It”

In most instances, participants responded to patronization by ignoring it. When asked about being treated differently because of her age, Catherine said, “I don’t let it bother me, if I do I kind of ignore it.” Laura notes that responding is not necessarily important but that it is “just an interesting thing to be aware of.”

Self Blame

Even if they ignore the patronization, it does not mean that they are not affected by it. In response to this topic Deanne said, “I don’t care, I know how I am, it doesn’t bother me, maybe because I have all my life, I don’t know.” While saying this Deanne began to cry, signaling a deeper concern for patronizing speech than she was willing to acknowledge. Other answers contained this similar inward struggle including Dan’s response saying he had never felt talked down to before but “maybe I’m just too dumb to notice.”

In response to the third research question, participants were to reflect on how patronizing speech affects their relationships with those younger than they are. Again, because of the limited number of those experiencing patronizing speech, little information was gathered on this subject. Of those who admitted being patronized, none of them explicitly said their relationships were affected by it.

In order to understand the concept of patronizing speech more thoroughly participants were also asked questions regarding stereotypes of the elderly. Thirty-two messages were recorded out of which three themes emerged (see Table 3).

Table 3. Emergent themes regarding stereotypes of the elderly

1	Resistance to Change
2	Physical Characteristics
3	Personality Traits

These themes reflect the participants' perception of the stereotypes held by society, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the elderly person interviewed. None of the participants felt the stereotypes were true of themselves or their same-age friends.

Resistance to change

The messages that make up this category include not wanting to learn new technology, being rigid, and dwelling on the past. Laura believes part of the reason the elderly are resistant to change is because they have a lot of practice in thinking that way. She says they "have a lot of conviction because they have done it their whole life." Laura says this conviction leads to some elderly having "extreme personalities" who then meet the criteria for being labeled rigid or judgmental.

Physical characteristics

Stereotypes of the elderly that were identified by the participants and based on physical characteristics include being frail, vulnerable, not taking care of themselves, and not having control of their faculties. Maggie described the elderly as having urology problems, defining urology wards as "a group of little old men with rusty zippers and yellow shoes." Other physical traits including wearing "old lady shoes," being over weight, and having gray hair are also included here.

Personality Traits

Personality traits identified as being stereotypical of the elderly include being cold, trusting of strangers, and unfriendly. This coincides with Beth's identification of the elderly as being "cranky, bossy, and impatient." Maggie believes the elderly are wistful, or regretful of what they have not done during their lifetime.

Although the elderly recognized these stereotypes, participants also reported that they are not true of every elderly person. Michelle believes "stereotypes have nothing to do with anything-the aging process is unique to everyone-stereotypes are fictitious." Laura also agrees with this saying "each person is unique just like the young; you will find different personalities at every age." However, most agreed that once a person reaches a certain age there are physical changes that do support the stereotypes based on physical characteristics. This certain age was not explicitly stated and again depends on the individual.

When asking about stereotypes, another theme emerged involving the participants view of their own generation. Maggie described a feeling of disgust for her own age peers saying, "Maybe I'm anti my own generation." This feeling stems from her belief that people her own age are not very interesting, and that they sometimes take advantage of the special handicap treatment some elderly receive. For instance, she says that "people getting meals on wheels are better off than I am and are abusing the program." Laura also noted a similar disinterest in her peers. She says, "the ones who don't talk about politics and religion probably aren't gifted enough to talk about anything else either so I don't talk to them at all." She complains, "a lot of [people my age] curl their toes and quit."

DISCUSSION

Based on the participants' answers, generalizations can be made about how the elderly interpret patronizing speech. First, it should be clear that the participants' answers regarding instances of patronizing speech best fit the description of patronizing speech as defined by Adler (2001) as disregarding a person's wants, needs, and beliefs in a demeaning or condescending way.

This idea of patronizing speech is different from other research, which usually refers to it as simplified grammar and vocabulary, exaggerated intonation, and terms of endearment (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986). Although simplified grammar and vocabulary may result in condescension, it is not a necessary condition for patronization.

When explaining instances of being treated differently by those younger than themselves because of their age, the participants described feeling worthless and disrespected. It is therefore acceptable to say that the elderly population does in fact experience patronizing speech as described above.

It is interesting to note that even though the elderly themselves do not recognize the speech as patronizing they still label the speech as negative. Therefore, even though Adler (2001) states that patronizing speech needs to be interpreted as such in order to be labeled as patronizing, the interpretation of the speech as negative still allows for this distinction.

The participants' reactions to patronizing speech corresponded with the research of Harwood et al. (1997) regarding response styles to patronizing speech. Most participants reported ignoring the patronizing speech, which they say may actually contribute to the continuation of its usage by the younger person. If the elderly do not respond in an assertive fashion to patronizing speech, the patronizer may not be aware that they are being patronized. Again, the definition of patronizing speech includes the speech being interpreted as patronizing by the elderly person. The elderly must admit to themselves that they are being patronized and then take action against it in order to prevent future patronizing speech.

There is also a sense of denial that can be seen in the participants' responses to patronizing speech. Those who did not report being patronized often qualified their answers with self-derogation or doubt about their ability to detect patronizing speech. This trend of diminishing elderly self-worth is reminiscent of Rothermund and Brandstatter's (2003) ideas regarding the elderly person's self-evaluations based on elderly stereotypes. Even though these individuals are not reporting patronizing speech, they may be affected by the stereotypes about their generation. Although the participants did not agree with most of the stereotypes they recognized, they are still being exposed to these negative messages. Just having one stereotypical characteristic of being "out of the loop" may lead the elderly to believe they are incompetent or unworthy of accusing someone of using patronizing speech. In order to protect their family and friends, it is possible that the participants did not report being patronized. Doing so may have felt like betraying them.

Those who did not report being patronized may be exempt from patronization due to their level of education. Most of the participants have a college degree and held professional positions for most of their lives. Because the participants were pooled from a current events class, this shows they are also making an effort to stay educated and in doing so, maintain a certain level of credibility with others. Being mentally and physically active, these participants differ from the stereotypical portrayal of the elderly. They may therefore be seen as exceptions, explaining the absence of experiencing patronizing speech.

Another reason the participants did not report being patronized may be because they do not feel they are old enough to fit into the category of the elderly. When giving examples of stereotypes of the elderly most participants referred to the elderly as "they" instead of "we." This may also explain why they did not feel the recognized stereotypes were accurate for themselves or their friends.

Explanations like these about how the elderly interpret or experience patronizing speech can be explained using Sensemaking Theory. Over years of exposure to elderly stereotypes and experiencing demeaning speech from others, the elderly have created their own "casual maps" that guide their reactions to patronizing speech. Again, for most participants this means when encountered with patronizing speech they react by ignoring it. The act of ignoring the patronizing speech allows the elderly person to deny responsibility for the other's actions and place blame on the other as ignorant. This gives the elderly person a reason for the patronizing speech and a way to make sense of it.

The opposite is true for those who blamed themselves for being patronized. Instead of making sense of the situation by faulting others, they blame themselves for the reason why they are being patronized. These elderly explain patronizing speech as a result of their own ignorance and lack of knowledge.

In addition to addressing the research questions, other important messages emerged and were analyzed. Two overriding conclusions developed from this data. First, in order to control their self-image, the elderly select what topics they will and will not discuss with both their same-age friends and in their younger relationships. Second, the elderly sustain relationships with those who are younger and older than they are for different reasons, reasons that enforce the positive self-image of themselves that they wish to protect.

Conclusion One

Participants were asked to describe their conversations in younger and same-age relationships, revealing four topics of interest: religion and politics, personal well-being, relationships, and recreation. These categories will be discussed as they pertain to each group identified by the elderly participants, including same-age non-related relationships and related and non-related younger relationships.

Same-Age Non-Related Relationships: Discussions surrounding politics and government were the most noted topic by the participants. The state of the country, including the cost of gas, the current war, the environment, and

the national debt were all listed as main concerns. Although accepted by most participants, there are some restrictions as to with whom religion and politics can be discussed. Dan says that in his group of friends “everyone already knows everyone’s opinion so there is no point in asking;” however, he and his friends do discuss politics around election time. Laura agrees saying, “by this age there is no point in discussing it.” She therefore reserves her politics and religion discussions for those who already share in her beliefs. Maggie and Roland both described instances of being warned not to talk about politics and religion. Maggie says she still talks about politics with her younger friends, but refrains from doing so in her same-age relationships. Roland however, continues to talk about politics and religion with all age groups.

When talking to same-age friends about their personal well-being, the participants explained this category as “catching up” with one another. Most participants meet monthly or sometimes weekly with a group of same-aged friends, so when they see each other they spend time talking about what has happened in their lives while apart. For Dan this includes inquiring about old friends, their health, and those who have recently died. Also included in this section is work-related conversation for those who have yet to retire.

Besides religion and politics, relationships were the most mentioned topic discussed between participants and their same-age friends. Michelle uses her conversation time with her same-aged girlfriend as therapy. It is a time where they can both talk about their husbands and worry about their grandchildren together. Laura also uses her time with friends to share advice about raising children and grandchildren. Conversations also involve caring for aging parents and giving each other support while they deal with these other relationships. Same-aged friends were seen as a safe haven where Jane says, “I can say anything and know it won’t leave that room.” Therefore, same-age relationships strengthen the bond between each other and help to strengthen the bonds with others.

When talking to same-aged friends, the participants did not report any recreational activities as major topics. This category will be defined according to younger relationships.

Related and Non-Related Younger Relationships: As mentioned, religion and politics was also included as a topic of conversation for most of the participants with their younger non-related friends. Although less emphasized than with the same-aged friends, some participants felt it was easier to talk to their children or grandchildren about politics and religion than with their same-age friends. For instance, Paula says her grandsons are very politically minded, so she enjoys talking politics with them. Participants also noted their children as good conversers in politics and include talking about the school system as a topic of interest.

Conversations with younger generations pertaining references to personal well-being were identified by the participants. Although similar to the topics of same-aged friends, those in younger relationships were fixated more on the younger person and less on the older person’s personal status. Beth often asks her grandchildren about their monetary status in order to offer her help in supporting them financially. She also inquires about their health, how much they have to eat, and if they have enough money for their cost of living. As grandparents, some participants have discussions with their grandchildren concerning their safety. For example, Laura warns her grandson about “bad websites” and tells him to be careful when searching on the internet. She has also addressed her grandson with concerns about his failing grades and how much him failing was hurting his parents. This encouragement was revealed by the participants as a need to share advice with their grandchildren and act as a source of support for them. These messages coincide with the work of Bettini and Norton (1991) who found that the elderly are viewed by younger generations as being counselors or advisors, resulting in relationships that are less equal and more superficial.

Discussions including relationship building were also recorded as part of participants’ conversations with younger generations. The general catching up and daily routine talk was noted with particular interest in school and grades of the younger person. Other family members are discussed as well as the younger person’s circle of friends. Paula talks with her grandsons about their dating relationships and is often illuminated with the latest dating terminology. She says, “Sometimes they tell me more than I want to know,” when it comes to the details of teen dating, but she continues to listen.

As noted, recreation was not included as a theme for the participants’ same-age relationships, but is one of the main themes for the participants’ conversations with those younger than they are. The specific recreational activity is different for each dyad because they include activities that are specific to the younger person. Dan’s granddaughter just passed her drivers test so this was a topic of discussion for the two of them. Sports is another topic that comes up frequently in discussions. Dan and Laura both spend time talking with their grandchildren about the sports they are involved in. Maggie has recently enjoyed debating the final four with her grandson, something they both have interest in. Shopping, redecorating, cooking, television and movies, and books were also activities listed. Clothes and the current fashion trends are important to Paula’s grandsons so they also spend time giving her fashion advice. She recalls one time when she was going to the orchestra, her grandsons made her change three times before approving of her attire.

Most topics discussed here were recalled with greater detail and enthusiasm for conversations with the participants' grandchildren than with their children. Conversations with their children focused mostly on personal well-being and their day-to-day tasks. For non-related younger relationships, these same themes were included, however to a lesser degree than for related younger relationships. Half of the participants reported little to no contact with non-related younger people. Beth says "there is a gap between the younger and the older" and wishes she knew more younger people. "In your normal course of events" Michelle says, "You just don't encounter them." Four of the participants recalled neighbors as their main source of contact with younger people. Dan talked about the change in his neighborhood from when his kids were young. He says now the neighborhood is filled with older people and it is rare to hear a younger person playing outside. Harwood and Lin (2000) also recorded this distance between the younger and older generations in regards to grandparent-grandchild relationships. They say the elderly are "victims of the geographical distance that separates them and the circumstances or infrequency of their contact" (p. 41). This prevents intimacy from building between the grandparent and grandchild, thus limiting the grandparent's role and topics of conversation with their grandchild.

Negative encounters with non-related younger people were also a concern for two of the participants. Both Beth and Deanne noted money as a source of contention between them and their younger neighbors. Deanne has loaned money to her neighbor but has later regretted it saying, "she (her neighbor) didn't budget her money well." Beth on several occasions has been approached by her younger neighbor for money. She says, "I just thought they thought I was a soft touch" and did not think it was her place to give the neighbor money.

Conclusion Two

The elderly were asked to describe what they gained or how they benefited from each of the relationship types described above. Two themes emerged with respect to the participants' same-age friends: the benefit of staying active and companionship. For the participants, staying active means getting out of their house and being part of the world in some way. Dan does this by participating in learning retirement classes to keep his mind active. He says, "I always say, you have to keep your head working." Most participants meet outside of their homes with a group of same-age friends, so once again they are actively participating in life.

Most of the benefits the participants listed fell under the category of companionship. This category includes the stability and support the elderly receive from each other. Paula says her friends have supported each other in dealing with the death of a parent as well as whatever issues are on their minds that day. No matter what, she says, her friends are always there for her and are never judgmental. Deanne says that it is also important to her that her same-age friends always be there for her, unlike children or grandchildren who may not be as accessible. This again, is probably the reason why the elderly turn most often to their same-age friends for support instead of their younger relatives.

The benefits of having relationships with younger people were seen as slightly different than for the participants' same-age friends. Here, two themes surfaced as well: gaining new insights and enrichment. The reward of gaining new insights is similar to the staying active category for same-age friends, except that the emphasis is placed on the younger person as keeping them active instead of the activity itself as keeping them active. Maggie described her grandchildren as "bringing me up to the light." For her this means feeling a part of the world in general, and specifically, her grandchildren's world. Staying mentally alert was again a benefit Dan listed as for his younger relationships.

One of the common benefits reported from interacting with younger friends is the feeling of being worth something. This falls under the category of enrichment. Beth says when her younger friends listen to her and are interested in her view points, she gains a sense of self worth. So, by having younger friends, the elderly are able to increase their self-worth that was reported earlier as being jeopardized. When explaining what she gained from relationships with younger co-workers Paula said, "Oh it was very good for my ego because they didn't dismiss what I said, they listened and had a sense of humor and treated me like a peer." At an earlier point Paula did say that she had more of a mentor role in regards to her younger co-workers. This type of relationship may influence the reason why her co-workers listened and respected her more. However, the respect she gains here helps to counteract the feelings of disrespect the elderly reported earlier, and again strengthens self-image.

Laura was a unique participant because she reported having more younger friends than same-age friends. With respect to these younger friends, she says, "most of them have enriched my life more than I have theirs." She says that "they have made it possible for me to tap into giving," and that it has put her in "a position to both emotionally and sometimes financially tap into that dimension" of her being. Again, this type of relationship benefits the elderly because it allows them to enhance themselves and in the process, their self-esteem.

LIMITATIONS

One of the main limitations to this research is the restricted population that was interviewed. The participants were highly educated and active in the community. Therefore, they may have answers completely different from elderly who live in assisted living or nursing homes. In addition, all participants were Caucasian, middle class individuals from the Midwest. Again, elderly from different demographics may present a different set of answers.

Due to the method of data analysis there may be a certain level of researcher bias. Although measures were taken to avoid this, the human nature of researchers is unavoidable and may therefore result in different conclusions if reproduced by another person. The way in which the researcher asked about patronizing speech may have also affected the outcome of the participants' answers. Instead of using the term patronizing speech, participants were asked about being treated differently because of their age. If asked directly about being patronized, the participants' answers may have been different.

Another difficulty in conducting this study was the lack of participants who had relationships with younger people who were not related to them. This was also found by Bettini and Norton (1991) in their intergenerational research. Most often participants noted lack of exposure to this younger generation on a daily basis as a reason for not having younger friends. However, this may be due to the negative experience the elderly have with patronizing speech. Being aware of the stereotypes of themselves may prevent the elderly from venturing out to befriend younger people. This would be an interesting topic for future research.

Future Research

There is still a lot unknown about the relationships elderly have with non-related younger people. These relationships are hard to research because of the lack of elderly reporting non-related younger friends, but should still be considered for future research. Future research should also consider the differences in experiencing patronizing speech between healthy, active elderly and the non-healthy, inactive elderly. Those who fit the stereotypes of the elderly may or may not report more instances of patronization. This may also include comparing varying ages of the elderly. Those who are older than the participants included in this study may also report more patronization. Cultural differences in patronizing speech and intergenerational relationships have also been widely ignored and may be helpful in shedding light on these relationships.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this research has been on the elderly population and their portrayal of patronizing speech. Participants presented their own perceptions of intergenerational communication as well as communication within their same generation. Comparisons were made between same-aged relationships and younger relationships in order to better understand how the elderly react to patronizing speech. Same-age relationships were found to be more equal in supporting each other, while relationships with younger people were seen as supporting mostly the younger person. However, both of these relationship types were used by the elderly in order to enhance their self-image. The data collected from the interviews revealed that the elderly do experience patronizing speech and react to it by either ignoring it or blaming themselves. These reactions are explained by the elderly as a result of their own ignorance or the ignorance of others. Stereotypes of the elderly may act as fuel for these reactions even if not believed as true by the individual. The elderly person's response to patronizing speech may need to be adjusted in order to prevent future patronization and allow intergenerational communication to occur.

With the advancing age of the baby-boomer generation, the elderly population is expected to continue to grow, allowing more and more opportunities for the young and the old to interact. The years of experience and knowledge the elderly possess as well as their happiness should be valued by younger generations in order to enhance the quality of intergenerational communication for all involved.

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