DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 285   CS 502 543

ABSTRACT
                Designed to present communications problems faced by
the elderly and to assist classroom teachers to develop activities
for dealing with them, this booklet begins by examining stereotypes
of older persons which minimize and distort communication with them.
It outlines common misconceptions about the elderly, centering on
their state of mind, health, capacity for work, interest in life and
sexual activity, and financial condition, and it notes that despite
television's capacity to serve a number of functions for the elderly,
it reinforces such stereotypes in advertising and programing. The
second part of the booklet provides exercises for use in a unit on
communication and the elderly, designed to restructure patterns of
communication that manifest or reinforce negative stereotypes about
older persons and the aging process. Exercises are grouped in the
following four sections: diagnosing attitudes toward the elderly;
examining the various media (television, magazines, and children's
books) for positive and negative stereotypes toward the aging;
encouraging empathy with the elderly regarding their communication
difficulties; and encouraging intergenerational communication. A list
of classroom film, musical, and literary resources is included.
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Communicating with the Elderly:
Shattering Stereotypes

Vicki S. Freimuth.
University of Maryland

Kathleen Jamieson
University of Maryland

CS502 943

Foreword

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system developed by the U.S. Office of Education and now sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE). It provides ready access to descriptions of exemplary programs, research and development efforts, and related information useful in developing more effective educational programs.

Through its network of specialized centers or clearinghouses, each of which is responsible for a particular educational area, ERIC acquires, evaluates, abstracts, and indexes current significant information and lists that information in its reference publications.

The ERIC system has already made available—through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service—much informative data, including all federally funded research reports since 1956. However, if the findings of specific educational research are to be intelligible to teachers and applicable to teaching, considerable bodies of data must be reevaluated, focused, translated, and molded into an essentially different context. Rather than resting at the point of making research reports readily accessible, NIE has directed the separate ERIC clearinghouses to commission from recognized authorities information analysis papers in specific areas.

In addition, as with all federal educational information efforts, ERIC has as one of its primary goals bridging the gap between educational theory and actual classroom practices. One method of achieving that goal is the development by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills (ERIC/RCS) of a series of sharply focused booklets based on concrete educational needs. Each booklet provides teachers with the best educational theory and/or research on a limited topic. It also presents descriptions of classroom activities which are related to the described theory and assists the teacher in putting this theory into practice.

This idea is not unique. Several educational journals and many commercial textbooks provide teachers with similar aids. The ERIC/RCS booklets are unusual in their sharp focus on an educational need and their blend of sound academic theory with tested classroom

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practices. And they have been developed because of the increasing
requests from teachers to provide this kind of service.

Topics for these booklets are recommended by the ERIC/RCS
National Advisory Committee. Suggestions for topics to be considered
by the Committee should be directed to the Clearinghouse.

Bernard O'Donnell
Director, ERIC/RCS

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1 Theory

Breaking barriers to communication between generations is the general purpose of this booklet. It is designed for use by secondary classroom teachers who desire to sensitize their students to the ways in which language reveals hidden judgments about elders and aging and to the ways in which media reinforce stereotypes about elders and aging. This booklet will isolate and debunk those stereotypes about elders which minimize and distort communication with them, by them, and about them. By encouraging awareness among students of some of the disabling communication problems that the elderly confront, it is hoped that younger and older persons will be helped to perceive each other more accurately and to enjoy more productive communication.

Intergenerational communication is an increasingly important topic because for the first time in history millions of persons are living beyond the age of sixty-five. In the United States their numbers will peak between the years 2010 and 2020 when post-war baby-boom children— who in the 1960s distrusted anyone over thirty—do themselves reach sixty-five. Between 1975 and 1995 (according to Series II Census data) the median age in this country will rise from 28.8 years to 33.6 years. Those over sixty-five made up 10.5 percent (approximately 23 million) of the U.S. population in 1975; by 1995 they will comprise 11.9 percent (approximately 30 million) of the population. Between 1975 and 2000, the fifty-five to sixty-four age group will increase by 16 percent, the sixty-five to seventy-four age group by 23 percent, and the population seventy-five and over by 60 percent. Experts project that the U.S. population will assume a stable age distribution only after 2050.

The benefits of intergenerational communication are many and obvious. Such communication may open rewarding relationships for both young and old, provide each age group with access to the experience of the other, enable younger persons to develop a clearer and more personalized sense of the past, and help both older and younger persons to understand and accept aging. But the barriers to intergenerational communication are many, and they require thoughtful consideration if the young and the old are to be freed to know one another well.

Factors That Minimize and Distort Communication between Generations

When younger and older people come together to communicate, a complex process begins, no different from any other communication encounter. We initially form some kind of impression of the person with whom we are communicating. This impression colors our reactions to the other person and partially determines the way in which that person will respond to us. This process of forming impressions and making judgments about others is called interpersonal perception. Our deficient interpersonal perception of persons of another generation can result in a breakdown in communication with them.

Generally we form perceptions of people in three ways. (1) We observe their objective properties. These properties include such things as age, weight, length of hair, color of skin, type of clothing, and so forth. These observations form the bases of some preliminary judgments about their personalities and attitudes. (2) We observe social behaviors, such as what they say and how they say it. These social behaviors may reinforce our original perceptions or change them. (3) Finally, we make judgments about other persons based on their unique characteristics.

An interpersonal judgment is likely to be accurate if it proceeds through all three steps, but frequently we don't take the time to form careful judgments about other people. Instead, we function on the basis of impressions. Often the final stage is omitted and judgments are made merely on the basis of objective properties and perhaps a few social behaviors. To simplify the impression formation process further, we carry around in our heads "ready-made compartments" which allow us to use objective properties to classify people quickly and easily. Such simplified classification of people is called stereotyping.

A stereotype is a simplified, mistaken belief which is widely held and either idealizes or vilifies a group or class. Stereotyping classifies people without considering individual differences. We've all heard statements such as "Women are more emotional than men," "Youngsters are naturally hot-headed," "Old people are forgetful." It is not only prejudiced people who stereotype—we all do it because it allows us to classify people quickly and easily. As Walter Lippmann wrote in *Public Opinion* (1922):

> Modern life is hurried. . . . There is neither time nor opportunity for
> intimate acquaintance. Instead we notice a trait which marks a
> well-known type, and fill in the rest of the picture by means of
> stereotypes we carry about in our heads.

Stereotyping is a barrier to communication when it distorts our ability to perceive people accurately, when we see them only as members of a

group and not as individuals. We perceive a person as a unique individual when we avoid broad, hasty generalizations which may cause misjudgment.

In intergenerational communication several communication variables interact with interpersonal perception to impede productive communication. Among the most basic is proximity. This is a factor that influences interpersonal attraction: we tend to like people with whom we interact frequently. In those instances in which there is a lack of proximity between the younger and older generations, the likelihood that members of one generation will misperceive members of another increases. The structure of our society actually works to reduce opportunities for the two generations to get to know each other. The tendency toward earlier retirement combines with mandatory retirement to remove older workers from contact with younger ones. In some instances, segregated housing for the elderly cloisters the elderly from the young. In a highly mobile society, grandchildren frequently live hundreds of miles from grandparents. Such lack of contact makes it difficult for the young to form impressions of older people as unique individuals (Verderber and Verderber, 1977).

Another important basis for personal interaction is homophily, the perceived likenesses that underlie the attraction of one person to another. The principle of homophily states that the more similar two communicators are the more likely it is that they will interact and that their interaction will be successful. One of our first perceptions of homophily is based on appearance. We perceive ourselves to be more similar to another person if we look like them. The fact that a seventeen year old and a seventy year old do not look alike may create a feeling of dissimilarity between them. Another significant perception is similarity of background. A seventeen year old and a seventy year old will often perceive their backgrounds as essentially dissimilar. Appearance and background homophily are often determined before any communication occurs between two people. On the other hand, attitude and value homophily are determined by communication. Unfortunately, our seventeen year old and seventy year old may never get this far! Attitude homophily is the degree to which feelings and general informational level are perceived to be similar. Value homophily is the degree to which basic beliefs (e.g., on moral questions) are perceived as similar. Even if our seventeen year old and seventy year old get past the initial barriers and begin to talk to each other, there is no guarantee that they will discover attitude and value homophily.

As a result of inaccurate perceptions, lack of proximity, and insufficient homophily, intergenerational communication is often stereotypic and impersonal. Stereotypes of the elderly include the views

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that "older people are generally ill, tired, not sexually interested, mentally slow, forgetful, and less able to learn new things, grouchy, withdrawn, feeling sorry for themselves, less likely to participate in activities (except perhaps religion), isolated, in the least happy or fortunate time of life, unproductive, defensive in various combinations and with various emphasis" (McTavish, 1971). Such negative stereotypes of elders affect not only the elderly but also persons of all ages who must adjust to and plan for the process of becoming older.

Stereotyping of the elderly is not the unique product of this century. In the *Rhetoric*, for example, Aristotle described elderly men as cynical, distrustful, small-minded, not generous, cowardly, fearful, too fond of themselves, shameless, slaves to the love of gain, querulous. Juvenal wrote in his *Satires, XI* that "old age is more to be feared than death." In *Of Age and Youth*, Francis Bacon observed, "Young men in the conduct and manage [*sic*] of actions, embrace more than they can quiet; fly to the end without consideration of the means and degrees. . . . Men of age object too much; consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon. . . ." Jonathan Swift's epigram, "Every man desires to live long, but no man would be old," perhaps sums up this theme found through the centuries. Such expressions are *gerontophobic*—they express fear of aging and implicit hostility toward the aged—and they have left their mark on present generations.

The consequences of age stereotyping influence persons of all age groups. Negative stereotyping of elders is capable of coloring the self-perception of the elders, others' perceptions of elders, and the expectations each of us brings to the process of aging. As Bennett and Eckman (1973) note: "Negative views of aging, life in general, and oneself may result in an old person's unwillingness or inability to seek needed services, health care, or other types of assistance. Negative attitudes of old people may affect others in their environs, who in turn may feel free to respond negatively to old people or to ignore them completely."

- Stereotyping often leads to treating older people as objects and not as persons, Some might argue that this nonperson status of elders is a natural part of the disengagement process. Disengagement is a gerontological theory of the aging process which suggests that withdrawal from social activity is functionally advantageous for both the individual and society. Society imposes withdrawal by successive role elimination—a termination of the active parental role and the employee role, for example. Proponents of this theory argue that elders withdraw voluntarily and are satisfied with their disengagement.

Others, however, subscribe to an activity theory, which states that being involved in purposeful activities and having continued social

interaction with others is just as important to elders as it is to younger individuals. From this point of view disengagement is seen as an unnatural process forced on elders and as an unsatisfying way of life. The natural tendency of the aged person to seek involvement is sometimes blocked by conditions imposed on elders such as inadequate access to transportation or mandatory retirement (Knapp, 1977). An inability to remain active may produce a "crisis in self-evaluation for the individual. The probability that he she will develop a negative image of the self and feel alienated from his/her environment ... increases as activity with and within that environment decreases" (Maddox and Eisdorfer, 1962).

Stereotyping can have the effect of denying the elderly the common supportive experiences by which people confirm their self-worth. For example, if an older person's hearing disability is interpreted as an inability to understand new ideas, then that person will probably be ignored in conversations. Such a person's opinions will not be sought. Sometimes the mere presence of the older person prompts implicit apologies: "Oh, this, is Grandma, she lives with us." Or consider the experience of touching, by which we signify the value of another human being. Often, elders are denied this confirmation of "personness." The affirming value of touch was demonstrated in a study of treatment of depression in institutionalized elderly persons (Power and McCarron, 1975). The renewal of human relationships through touching experiences had a noticeable effect on the self-concept of the elders and encouraged them to interact with others they lived with.

Stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies, if elders and those who are interested in them permit negative stereotypes to define the identity of elderly persons. Rubin (1968) points out one example of self-fulfilling prophecy when he argues that the widespread belief that age brings sexual dysfunction has a self-fulfilling effect. Similarly, teachers are familiar with the older person who returns to school and faces the first exam with the assumption that he or she is too old to learn and cannot keep up with "the young people." Like other groups, elders need successful models of aging.

Persons of all ages are influenced by their own expectations and by the expectations of others. Negative stereotypes of elders are developed at a very young age. In a study by Seefeldt et al. (1977) most three to eleven year olds were able to select the oldest man from pictures of the man in four stages of life. Children, using physical characteristics to select the oldest, reported, "He has the most wrinkles" and "He hasn't much hair." When the children were asked how they would feel when they were that old, the majority responded with such negative descrip-

tions as "I would feel awful," "I'd be nearly dead," and "I'll be sick and tired and ready to be buried." A 1974 Harris' survey found that the youngest group of Americans held the most negative attitudes toward the oldest group.

, Such negative attitudes are unfortunately not confined to youth; they are present in other areas of society, as well. A number of carefully controlled studies, for example, have concluded that most medical personnel—including medical students, doctors, nurses, therapists, psychiatric personnel, and social workers—subscribe to negative stereotypes of elders and consequently prefer to work with other age groups. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights offered "pessimistic attitudes on the part of therapists because of stereotypical beliefs about older persons" as the reason for therapists' disinterest in treating older persons. The world of consumer marketing, too, shies away from concern for the elderly. An executive of Elizabeth Arden, a leading cosmetic firm, betrayed such an attitude by admitting, "We don't want to be connected with older women."

The problem of stereotyping is certainly widespread and well entrenched. The danger inherent in attempting to counter any type of stereotyping is that positive stereotypes, which are unrealistic, will replace negative stereotypes, which are also unrealistic. The ideal, of course, would be an understanding of the range of human possibilities at every age. Some elderly persons do exhibit characteristics which are embodied in stereotypes. Most elderly persons do not.

. Direct contact with members of a stereotyped group has the potential to minimize negative stereotyping. Thus, those who have direct contact with elderly persons hold few negative views of elders. Of course, one's views of older persons are in part a function of the type and conditions of exposure. Exposure to noninstitutionalized older people, for example, was found to produce attitudes which were positive; while exposure to institutionalized older persons tended to produce negative attitudes. It is significant that children who attribute negative characteristics to elders attribute positive attributes to their own grandparents.

It is possible to change the filters through which a group is perceived. Jokes ridiculing the handicapped, alcoholics, or members of ethnic and racial minorities were once considered a legitimate form of humor. Without compunction, comedians mimicked stutterers and the hard of hearing as well as persons suffering other physical impairments. Such forms of humor are now considered in poor taste. The change is attributable to altered public sensitivity. For example, although a number of comedians continue to base their routines on the assumption that to be an alcoholic is funny, public awareness that alcoholism is a serious problem and not a laughing matter is contributing to a decline

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in this form of humor. If a form of humor directed against elders is in fact offensive, public sensitivity to that fact could be heightened in a similar fashion.

The process of heightening sensitivity about elders has already begun. "Gray Panthers" and "Gray Power" are attempting to do for elders what "Black is Beautiful" and "Black Power" did for blacks—transform the pejorative into the positive while replacing the presumption of powerlessness with the assertion of power. In order to alter public sensitivity and expose our hidden judgments about elders, accurate information about this group must be communicated.

When Is Old?

Fundamental to all stereotypes of elders is the assumption that at some definable point persons become "old." But there is not some fixed point at which you and I stop being ourselves and start being "old persons." Age is relative. To an eight year old, twenty-one years old may seem "old." To a sixty-five year old, a ninety year old may seem "old," but a seventy year old, "not so old." The U.S. Department of Labor considers workers over forty-five "older." Some federal programs define "older" as sixty-two, others as sixty-five. In Puritan times a person was considered old at sixty. Bernard Baruch observed, "Old age is always fifteen years older than I am."

Satchel Paige once asked "How old are you if you don't know how old you are?" The question is an important one, for the age we perceive ourselves to be may differ from our actual biological age. The questions (1) How old are you? (2) How old do you look? (3) How old do you feel? and (4) How old do you act? often yield different answers. In fact the same person's answer may differ at different times of the day. Most persons between the ages of sixty-five and seventy reject the label "old" and instead label themselves "middle aged." Between 25 and 50 percent of those over seventy consider themselves middle aged.

Biologically, persons "age" at different rates. Consequently, biological age and chronological age may differ. Some seventy year olds can outrun some forty year olds. George Bernard Shaw was commenting on this sort of phenomenon when he observed, "Some are younger at seventy than others at seventeen." Yet inherent in Shaw's phrasing is the assumption that being "young" is more positive than being "old."

The concept "being old" covers many stereotypes with which everyone is familiar. In general, it serves as shorthand for the gamut of misconceptions to which the elderly are vulnerable: state of mind, unsteady; health, poor; capacity for work, limited; interest in life,

fading; economic condition, impoverished; and so on. All these
assumptions may be challenged as unfair to the real facts about the
elderly. In what follows hidden judgments about the elderly contained
in everyday expressions will be countered with accurate information to
correct common misconceptions.

> "You can't teach an old dog new tricks; the old people are set in
> their ways." (Colonel Sanders founded Kentucky Fried Chicken
> after cashing his first Social Security check.)

The generation we stereotype as "set in its ways" has adapted
successfully to technological changes unthinkable a century ago.
Persons who grew up without indoor plumbing and relied on the horse
and buggy for transportation now live in a world in which even the
S.S.T. has "indoor plumbing." The age group which consumes more
television than any other group of adults grew up without television or
radio. A major study of personality characteristics (Mass and Kuypers,
1974) conducted over a period of forty years concluded that there is no
evidence to support the popular belief that "aging ushers in a massive
decline in psychological functioning or a harrowing down of ways to
live." Yet only 19 percent of a national sample viewed older persons as
"very open minded and adaptable."

> "I can't remember your name: I must be getting old." (Cato the
> elder learned Greek at the age of eighty.)

The ability of older persons to absorb information has been
questioned by studies which asked older persons to absorb quickly
paced verbal stimuli. However, when the older adult is able to control
the pace at which the information is presented, the gap between older
and younger persons practically disappears. When the information
being processed relates to the experience of the older person, that person
will process it as quickly as a younger person. The National Institute on
Aging reports, "Reaction times do slow with age, but most of the aged
fully retain until they are very old, and often until their death, their
ability to reason, their memory, their wit" (Our Future Selves, 1977).

Persons over sixty do typically earn lower scores on public affairs and
general tests of scientific knowledge than younger persons. But the
difference in scores between older and younger persons is largely a
function of educational level, not age. The educational level of those
over sixty-five is lower than that of the population at large. In 1975, the
median school years completed by those over sixty-five was 8.8 years for
males and 9.0 years for females. In contrast, those between twenty-two
and twenty-six years old (in 1973) had completed an average of 12.81

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years of school and those between fifty and sixty years old had completed an average of 11.03 years of school. Only 10 percent of those approaching age sixty-five at the turn of the century had completed a high school education. Of those approaching sixty-five in the year 2000, 70 percent will have completed high school.

Another factor contributing to the misconception that mental functions dull with age is the fact that the elderly, until recently, have been tested by instruments designed to measure the abilities of the young. Age-biased IQ tests, for example, defined and measured abilities important during youth and so naturally suggested that the elderly were deficient. Recent findings have exposed these biases. For instance, longitudinal studies conducted at Duke University concluded that intelligence does not decline between sixty and sixty-nine. The only exception was found in persons with very high blood pressure. One twelve-year study of persons who averaged eighty-one years of age actually found cases of increased ability (Kaluger and Kaluger, 1974). In 1973, the American Psychological Association abandoned the notion that the relation between age and intelligence is inverse.

> *"Grandpa's lost his marbles."* (Victor Hugo was elected to the French Senate at the age of sixty-eight.)

Dr. Samuel Johnson commented on this stereotype when he observed that "there is a wicked inclination to suppose an old man decayed in his intellect." The picture of old age painted by Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (II, vii) is a dismal one: "Last scene of all,/ That ends this strange eventful history, Is second childishness and mere oblivion;/ Sans teeth, sans-eyes, sans taste, sans everything." Yet, as Congressman Claude Pepper, seventy-eight-year-old chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging, is fond of remarking: "Some dodder at thirty, some at sixty and some pass through life without doddering at all."(The image of the "doddy" old man or "batty" old woman, in fact, may prevent older persons from seeking medical help for treatable organic or psychiatric illnesses.)

Senility is not a necessary consequence of aging. What often is defined as senility may on closer examination be identified as the reaction to a drug or combination of drugs, anemia, and malnutrition or a treatable physical impediment or disease. For example, a study by Niedringhaus (1978) concludes that "older persons may be termed confused, when they actually don't hear the things that we are telling them." As our knowledge of the process of aging increases, use of such diagnostic phrases as "senile dementia"—the madness of age—will continue to decrease.

"Old and sick are synonyms." (Dwight Eisenhower was reelected to the presidency at the age of sixty-six.)

Older persons have built up immunity to many illnesses which threaten younger persons. Chronic illness does increase with age, but the incidence of acute conditions actually decreases with age. Those over sixty-five experience approximately twice the number of "bed disability days" as the population at large. Compared to younger age groups, persons over sixty-five do experience greater amounts of visual and hearing impairment and a severe increase in heart conditions; some muscle loss occurs; our bones become more brittle; and the likelihood of arthritis increases.

Some older persons (between 5 and 15 percent) suffer from brain lesions, which if present in large quantities can produce memory loss; only in its most severe form, however, does this disease, known as SDAT (senile dementia of the alzheimer's type), produce loss of control over bodily functions, mental deterioration, and finally death. Overall, the picture is not bleak. Only 9.1 percent of those over sixty-five report that their health is poor, while 22.4 percent label it fair, 38.9 percent, good, and 29.1 percent, excellent.

At any age, illness or medication may affect one's ability to communicate. If we assume, however, that aging brings mental decline, difficulties in communicating will be mistakenly assumed to indicate inevitable senility and remain uncorrected. For example:

> Blood pressure often rises with age. Some drugs used to reduce high blood pressure produce dizziness.

> A stroke may impair speech functions.

> An acute illness such as pneumonia may produce no symptoms other than confusion in an older person.

> As hearing declines a loss in channel capacity may slow the rate at which oral communication can be decoded.

> *"Ending mandatory retirement will clot promotional channels with doddering incompetents." "Firms need young blood."* (At the age of seventy-nine, Marc Chagall produced two murals for the Metropolitan Opera in New York.)

Conventional expressions, such as firms need "young ideas and young blood" and the elderly are in their "twilight years," assume a stereotype challenged by research. During World War II it was necessary to employ retired older workers in the aircraft plants of Southern California. At that time, Ross McFarland (1973) conducted a study

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which found that older workers "had greater stability on the job, fewer accidents, and less time lost from work than younger employees." Since McFarland's pioneering work, studies by the Department of Labor and the National Council on Aging, among others, have found that older workers are able to produce work which is qualitatively and quantitatively equal or superior to that of younger workers. The Department of Labor found greater differences in work productivity within age groups than between age groups. Nevertheless, only 3 percent in a National Council on Aging-Harris survey thought that the elderly are "very good at getting things done."

> "Pack grandma off to the nursing home." (Maggie Kuhn organized the Gray Panthers at the age of sixty-four.)

The myth that most elderly persons are lonely and unloved, divorced from family, bereft of human contact is tenacious. According to Shanas (1978), "In the United States most old people with children live close to at least one of their children and see at least one child often. Most old people see their siblings and relatives often, and old people, when either bedfast or housebound because of ill health, are twice as likely to be, living at home as to be resident in an institution." The notion that children heartlessly "dump" their aging parents into nursing homes also is disputed by the evidence. Institutionalizing an elderly relative is generally viewed as the option of last resort—an option entertained reluctantly—and a decision made only after undergoing "severe personal, social and economic stress" (Shanas, 1978).

The myth of the lonely, unloved old person is sustained by another myth—the notion that most elderly persons are in institutions. One study found that "75 percent of a sample of nursing students thought older persons resided in nursing homes while 35 percent of a group of young psychologists thought the same." In fact, only about 5 percent of the elderly are institutionalized. The percent of elderly persons in institutions remained constant between 1962 and 1975 (*New Perspectives in Health Care for Older Americans*, 1976).

> "When you get old you just sit around and do nothing." (At the age of seventy-seven Congressman Claude Pepper propelled through Congress a bill to extend protection from forced retirement.)

Some elderly persons do disengage from society. Many do not. Serving as Foster Grandparents keeps 15,184 elderly persons usefully occupied; 233,878 participate as Retired Senior Volunteers; and 2,708 serve as Senior Companions. Data noting that the elderly favor public

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affairs and news programming confirms that, in general, elderly persons are not motivated by a desire to disengage from society.

Also significant is the active role elderly persons play in government. In 1976, 59.2 percent of the population of voting age reported voting. In contrast, 62.2 percent of those over sixty-five reported voting. Elderly persons also register in greater percentages than the electorate as a whole. Of those over sixty-five who were eligible to register, 71.4 percent did so. In 1976, persons over fifty-five cast 34.8 percent of all votes cast; persons over sixty-five cast 15.8 percent of all votes.

Encouraged by the availability of Social Security and pensions, most persons retire before age sixty-five. Until the law was changed in 1979, many others were removed from the labor force by mandatory retirement at sixty-five. Labor force participation by males over sixty-five dropped from 46.5 percent in 1948 to 20.3 percent in 1976. Participation in the labor force by women over sixty-five increased from 8.6 percent in 1948 to 10.5 percent in 1955 and began to drop in 1962. In 1976, 8 percent of women over sixty-five participated in the labor force. In 1975, about 3 million persons over sixty-five participated in the labor force. The Bureau of the Census projects only modest increases in that figure by 1980 (3,007,000), 1985 (3,017,000), and 1990 (3,102,000). That projection does not take into account the increase in labor force participation which will follow congressional extension of protection from manda-tory retirement to age seventy in 1979.

"When you're old they ship you off to the poor house." (Nelson Rockefeller, a multimillionaire, lived to the age of seventy.)

Although the number of elderly persons suffering poverty remains unacceptably high, the rate of poverty among the elderly is overesti-mated by the public. Seventy-four percent of the students in one survey reported the belief that "a majority of older people have incomes below the poverty level." The extent to which that negative perception is engraved in public consciousness was revealed in the finding that almost half of the faculty in human development surveyed at Duke University and the University of Pennsylvania thought that a majority of the elderly were in poverty (Palmore, 1977).

The decline between 1966 and 1975 in both numbers and percent of persons sixty-five and older in poverty is marked. In 1966, 5.1 million persons sixty-five and older were in poverty; in 1975, 3.3 million. Despite the fact that persons over sixty-five generally earn less and spend less than the population as a whole, there are nearly 8 million with household incomes of $15,000 or more. While it is true that the median income of the retired worker in this country is less than half of that

person's preretirement income, extended protection from mandatory retirement will extend the earning potential of those who previously would have been forced from their jobs at age sixty-five. Also, a number of programs, including SSI, Medicare, and Medicaid have contributed to the reduction in the number of elderly victims of poverty.

"You're just a dirty old man." (Senator Strom Thurmond, age seventy-five, is the father of four preteenage children.)

The Roman sage Publius Syrus said, "It is natural for a young man to love, but a crime for an old one." Centuries later, Simone de Beauvoir (1972) commented on the same stereotype, "If old people show the same desires, the same feelings, and the same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust; in them love and jealousy seem revolting or absurd, sexuality repulsive . . . ." In fact, the capacity for satisfying sexual activity continues as we age.

Stereotypes and Television

Stereotypes about the elderly and aging are reinforced not only by interpersonal communication but also by the media. Various stereotypes in literature have been noted. Television, too, betrays society's assumptions that aging is a process to be dreaded. Madison Avenue has for years bombarded the consumers of the broadcast and print media with the assumption that aging is a pejorative term and youth a positive term: "Good skin starts young and stays younger looking with . . .," "I look younger with . . . , makes me feel ten years younger." Consistent with these appeals, it is young women who appear in most beauty product ads and older women who appear in ads for pain relievers, digestive aids, laxatives, and denture formulas. As the size of the older population increases and the economic importance of the elderly as a consuming population increases, such ads will probably include more older characters and eliminate "aging" as a pejorative term. The first signs of such changes are already evident. The percent of older women appearing in ads increased between January and October 1978. The percent of ads using aging as a pejorative term and youth as a positive term also declined.

A number of studies also suggest that elderly persons are likely to be portrayed as victims in prime-time dramas. Because the viewer willingly grants that older persons are helpless, such casting saves the producers and writers the time needed to establish vulnerability in a character. Yet, the data from the National Crime Panel surveys do not support the popular belief that elders are more likely to be victimized by crime. In

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fact, the data indicate that the more than 20 million elderly people in
this country are far less likely to be criminally victimized than are young
persons, whether by personal offenses or by crimes against household
property. The studies show that the highest rate of victimization occurs
in the younger age groups, with each older group having progressively
lower rates. Persons sixty-five and over have the lowest rates of all.

Of course, none of these statistics measures the true impact of crime
on elderly people. It is widely recognized that elderly crime victims as a
group, many of whom live on relatively low fixed incomes, suffer the
greatest financial set-backs, with little hope of recouping their losses.
Nonetheless, televised portrayal of the elderly as more likely to be
victimized is clearly a distortion. The Gray Panthers also have suggested
that in its search for the dramatic, televised news overplays crime against
the elderly. Because television is a powerful, pervasive medium, its
ability to reinforce or eradicate stereotypes ought to be briefly addressed.

Television serves a number of identifiable functions for the elderly. It
informs. It entertains. It provides a way of passing time. It serves as a
form of companionship. It segments the day into manageable units of
time. It may, in addition, serve a vital psychosociological function.
Graney and Graney (1974) argue that the mass media "may play a
critical role in maintenance of social psychological well-being among
older people when friends and relatives are (often) dead and when
churches and favored voluntary organizations are dominated by new
and unfamiliar interests." The mass media, according to Schramm
(1969), "with some people more than others, in some situations more
than others—help to keep old people in touch with environment,
combat the progressive disengagement, maintain a sense of 'belonging'
to the society around them."

Persons of all ages may also look to television to provide role models
of successful aging. Grandma and Grandpa Walton apparently served
that function. Twenty-two percent of those eighteen through sixty-four
and 14 percent of those sixty-five and over who saw such older people on
TV indicated that they looked up to or admired the grandparents on
"The Waltons."

Actual depiction of the elderly and perceived depiction of the elderly
may differ. If, for example, older persons portrayed on television
comport with our stereotyped view of the elderly, the television
portrayal may be judged fair when it is in fact distorted. In 1974 Harris
found that "on the whole, the public is not critical of the media for the
way they project older people." One of five television viewers reported
that television programs "make older persons look worse than they
really are." However, in assessing the public's general image of the

elderly, the survey found that "the image of older people held by the public at large is a distorted one tending to be negative and possibly damaging." Harris concluded that the media "may be protecting and reinforcing the distorted stereotypes of the elderly and myths of old age." Since 1974, a number of groups, including the Gray Panthers, the National Council on the Aging, the Getting On television project, and Congressman Pepper's House Committee on Aging, have focused public attention on age stereotyping and the media. There are no credible national data to determine whether perception of televised portrayal of the elderly or portrayal itself have changed as a result.

The first part of this booklet has examined some of the stereotypes of older persons which minimize and distort communication with them, by them, and about them. It has asked how these stereotypes are manifest in and reinforced by communication. The second part of the booklet contains exercises designed to restructure patterns of communication which manifest or reinforce negative stereotypes about older persons and the process of aging.

2 Practice

This section of the booklet suggests several exercises and activities that may be used in a unit on communication and the elderly. These activities are organized in four sections reflecting the major categories treated in the Theory section: statements that reflect our otherwise hidden judgments; communication media by which stereotypes are perpetuated; communicative problems that some of the elderly share with other people; and ways of achieving more accurate perceptions of aging by communication.

Section I, "Diagnosing Attitudes toward the Elderly," helps the student discover his or her own hidden judgments about older people as well as the judgments of others. The "Effect of Attitudes on Communication" exercise can increase student awareness of the ways in which such hidden judgments affect communication with older persons. "Category Labeling" should give students insight into how it feels to be labeled and how they would respond to such labeling.

Section II includes exercises that examine the various communications media (e.g., television, magazines, children's books) which express and sometimes reinforce stereotypes about the elderly. It is important to note positive as well as negative stereotypes about the elderly. The teacher might also want to examine the constraints imposed on character development by each individual medium.

Section III includes exercises designed to encourage empathy with communication problems that confront some elders.

Section IV suggests activities that encourage intergenerational communication. Teachers may want to contact local organizations of older people for these exercises. Creative expression activities are also recommended.

I. Diagnosing Attitudes toward the Elderly

Am I Stereotyping the Elderly?

In order to sensitize students to the stereotypes they use when communicating with the elderly, give the following questionnaire and ask

students to indicate whether they agree or disagree with each statement.

> Most old people are sick.
>
> Most old people live in nursing homes.
>
> Most old people are retired.
>
> Most old people would prefer to live in Florida.
>
> Most old people live in poverty.
>
> Most old people cannot learn as easily as when they were young.
>
> Most old people are hard of hearing.
>
> Most old people have no interest in sex.
>
> Old people are more religious than young people.

Using material from the theory section of the booklet, the teacher could discuss each of the statements, presenting the accurate version if the statement is false. Students might also be asked to explore the origin of some of these stereotypes. Have students think of elderly people they are close to (grandparents, for example), and ask them if these people fit their stereotypes.

How Do Our Attitudes about the Elderly Affect Our Communication with Them?

After students have explored the different attitudes they and others express about older people, the teacher might focus attention on the effects these attitudes have on communication with the elderly. Ask each student to write brief descriptions of specific communicative interactions they have had with older persons. (The student might prefer to submit these reports anonymously.) These descriptions could be collected and redistributed to small groups of four to six students for analysis. With the help of the entire class, the teacher could formulate the areas of analysis. The following are some suggestions:

> What were the underlying assumptions of each participant?
>
> Were these assumptions warranted or were they stereotypic?
>
> Was the communication productive or unproductive? Why?
>
> If unproductive, how could the communication have been improved?

Interviews on Aging

The following activity should give students some understanding of how

people of all ages view the aging process as well as some valuable interviewing experience. Have each student complete at least one interview with a child, a teenager, a young adult, a middle-aged person, and an older person. The class may participate in developing the interview schedule. Questions might include the following:

At what age is a person "old"?

What age would you like to be?

Describe what your life will be like when you are seventy.

Category Labeling

The following exercise could be used after students have identified prevalent attitudes about the elderly. This exercise will enable students to assess the effect of stereotyping on communicative behavior.

Divide students into small groups of from four to six persons. Provide a topic which the students will discuss in their small groups—since this was not assigned as a topic to research, the teacher should provide some basic information on the topic. The teacher might choose a controversial issue in the community, region, or state which will have an impact on all age groups (e.g., legislation allowing the city to add a 1 percent sales tax). Tell students that before they begin the discussion on this topic, you are going to put labels on their foreheads. This label is not to be seen by the person who will be wearing it, nor should anyone reveal the identifiers on another person's label. These labels will instruct the members of the group on how they should act and react to the person bearing the label. Labels are prepared ahead of time and should contain certain phrases which are commonly associated with the elderly: "I'm confused," "I'm old and senile," "Pay no attention to me," "I'm falling apart," "I'm worthless," "I'm poor and sick," "Repeat that, I didn't hear." One or more members of each group should have a "positive" label: "I have good ideas" or "Tell me I'm right." After the group discussion is completed (the discussion may be as short as five to ten minutes—groups should be given sufficient time to let the labels influence behavior and yet allow students to discuss the issue), each student is to relate his or her feelings about the discussion and the way she or he was treated during the discussion. Ask what they think their label said, then allow them to read their label. Pay particular attention to what is said when each removes the label. When all students have discussed feelings and read the labels, return to the large group and discuss individuals' reactions to the way they were treated in the group.

II. Stereotypes of the Elderly

Stereotyping in Humor

Jokes may be a reflection of some stereotypes that are commonly held but infrequently stated. Everyone has heard jokes about Poles, Jews, Catholics, and blacks that attribute stereotypic characteristics to these groups which would be inappropriate to voice except in jest. Jokes about the elderly mirror some of the stereotypes about this group.

Students could be asked to collect jokes about the elderly over a period of time. As the class listens to these jokes, different themes could be developed to categorize these jokes. Richman (1977) identified ten themes in the one hundred jokes about the elderly he analyzed. Seven of these themes were negative and three positive. The following most frequent themes are listed with an example of a joke that would fit the theme. The first five themes are negative.

Lying about age.

Teacher: "Johnny, how old is a person who was born in 1902?"
Johnny: "Man or woman?"

Association of age with the loss of attractiveness.

A woman was asked if she carried a memento of someone in her locket. "Yes, it is a lock of my husband's hair," she replied. "But your husband is still here," she was told. "Yes, but his hair isn't."

Aging as an undesirable quality in its own right.

A little girl going to bed was reminded by her mother to include Grandma in her prayers and to pray that God should let her live to be very, very old. "She's old enough," replied the little girl. "I'd rather pray that God would make her young."

Age associated with physical or mental decline.

An old lady visited a doctor and presented a long list of aches and complaints. The doctor finally exclaimed in exasperation, "You know, I can't make you any younger." "Who wants you to make me younger," replied the old lady, "I want you to help make me older."

Aging is a time of sexual decline.

There is a well-known story about Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, then in his nineties, who was walking one day with a friend. They passed an attractive young girl. The justice turned to look at her, and said, "Oh, to be seventy again!"

Some themes are positive. Here is an example:

> Affirmative of life.
>
> An old man was walking up a steep hill, carrying a heavy load. Finally in complete weariness and disgust, he threw his burden down and cried, "I can't take it anymore. Let the Angel of Death come and take me!" At that the Angel of Death appeared before him and said, "You called?" The old man quickly replied, "Yes, will you help me get this load back on my shoulders?"

Stereotypes Reflected in Language

The phrases with which we label people often reveal our otherwise hidden attitudes toward them. Students might interview older persons to determine how, if at all, they would like to be identified as an age group, and what phrases and expressions offend them. In order to prepare the students for the interview, the following topics might be discussed:

1. The assumption embodied in such expressions as "old duffer," "little old lady in tennis shoes," "old hag," "old biddy." (Of what sex is the person being described by each phrase? What is the origin of the phrase?).

2. The actual meaning of such statements as "She is well-preserved," "He's getting on in years," and "You don't look your age." (In what context is each used? What is the origin of the phrase "well preserved"? To whom or to what is that phrase usually applied? At what age is the comment "You don't look your age" considered appropriate? What does that indicate about our assumptions about aging?) Students might ask how older persons interpret such remarks. Congressman Claude Pepper commented (in 1977), "This September I turned seventy-seven years old, and I must confess that I do not feel demonstrably different than I did at sixty. Yet, daily, I weather an onslaught of well-intentioned persons who tell me that I do not look my age. Such observations raise the question, 'How does one expect a seventy-seven year old to look?' I suspect that a seventy-seven year old is expected to appear toothless and doddering, a caricature of his or her former self."

3. What accounts for pejorative labeling of elders by others? For example, Dr. Robert Butler, head of the National Institute on Aging, explains use of "callous" epithets among medical students by observing:

> The first older person that the average medical student meets in

medical school, aside from some of his teachers, is the cadaver....
few American medical schools pay attention to the disturbing
dreams, the nightmares, the nausea, the vomiting, and the confu-
sion the medical student faces in response to the dismember-
ment of the body. It is small wonder, then, that the student, left to
his or her defenses and coping mechanisms, develops a negative
attitude. "Gallows" humor emerges. Youth oriented Peter Panism,
or callous and cruel epithets such as "crock," "turkey," "toad," and
the one I just heard—"dirtball"—become synonymous with the
older person.

4. How, if at all, do older persons want to be identified as an age
-group? Students could be asked to brainstorm to determine all the
terms they can think of that are used to refer to elders (e.g., aged,
old, older, elder, elderly, older American, senior citizen, golden
ager, old timer). Are some more positive than others? Are any
considered negative by some and positive by others? (This exercise
might provide the basis for discussion of the notion that meaning
is in people, not in words.) Discussion might focus on a statement
by Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, that " 'senior
citizens', is a euphemism which we reject as insulting and
demeaning. I prefer to be called by my name, or, if not, I'd like to be
identified as an 'old person' or an 'elder' for this is what I am."
(What does "senior citizen" imply? What does "older American"
imply? Why does Kuhn reject the phrase "senior citizen"? What
does "elder" connote? In what ways, if at all, is it a more positive
term than "senior citizen"?) Students might discuss the possibility
that a term considered positive by the speaker is offensive to the
person spoken to or spoken about. For example, a nurse in a
nursing home who refers to all older persons as "grandma" or
"grandpa" might intend it as an expression of affection. Students
might ask how they react when persons other than their parents
called them "son" or "daughter."

.The teacher could lead a discussion about the ways in which social
movements affect language usage (e.g., the move from "colored" to
"Negro" or "black" in the civil rights movement; the change from
"girls" to "women" in the wake of the women's rights movement). In
this context, the class might discuss the meaning of the phrases "gray
power" and "gray panthers."

Stereotyping in Magazines

Ask students to examine several popular magazines such as *Glamour*,
Sports Illustrated, *Time*, *People*, and *Ebony* for advertisements either

using older characters or selling products to the elderly. For each advertisement, have the students record the product advertised and the role of the elderly person. If the students' results are consistent with others' experience, they'll find few elderly in magazine ads: the majority of the ads show young women. In several issues of *Glamour*, *Time*, *People*, and *Sports Illustrated*, for example, no older women appeared in ads. The older woman, when visible, is likely to be shown in an ad for hair color or pain relievers. A particularly offensive example is an older woman in a full page ad for a facial firm-up product. In the "before" segment, the photo is captioned, "Even with make up, lines and wrinkles still stare through—broadcast her true age to the world."

Older men are portrayed more positively in magazine ads. Age seems to be equated with wealth in males (e.g., a well-dressed older man promoting expensive men's clothing). Age in males also connotes experience and credibility in the ads. An older mechanic sells car parts. Older men are shown in an antique photograph selling sewing machines. A Kraft ad in *Ebony* is an example of positive portrayal of all ages. Two grandfathers and a grandmother are shown communicating with all ages at a family reunion.

One would expect the most unbiased ads in a publication about the elderly. In a recent issue of *The Gerontologist*, however, a distressed older woman is shown suffering from senility, which is euphemistically called "gray area symptoms."

Students should examine topics of *Modern Maturity*, the magazine of the American Association of Retired Persons, to discover how older persons want to be portrayed journalistically. Students also could be asked to examine the fiction in popular magazines. A discussion could focus on the portrayal of the older characters. What were their roles? What was the quality of their relationships with others? Was the portrayal stereotypic in any way? Were any communication problems apparent in the stories?

Stereotyping in Children's Books

Research has indicated that stereotyped perceptions of the elderly are held even by young children. How does children's fiction portray older people? Students could be asked to look through a number of children's books (younger brothers or sisters may own some and the public library should have an adequate collection) to see how older people are portrayed in the stories.

If students' results are consistent with the experiences of other investigators, they'll find that older characters are stereotyped as unexciting and unimaginative. These characters seem to be communi-

cating to children that old age is boring. In *Good Night Moon*, the old woman simply sits in a rocking chair. In *The Giving Tree*, the old man returns and says, "I don't need very much now . . . just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired." Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother is ill in bed. Older people are often destitute and unhappy in children's books. In *The Old Woman and Her Pig*, "a poor old woman lived alone in a little house." And Old Mother Hubbard's cupboards were bare.

Stereotyping in Television

After students have discussed many of the prevalent stereotypes of the elderly, they could be asked what role mass media play in forming and perpetuating these stereotypes. TV commercials, for example, must develop a character or a plot in thirty to sixty seconds. One way to quickly introduce a character as "Grandpa" is to use stereotyped characteristics. Give students a log such as the one presented in Figure 1 and ask them to watch three hours of prime-time television and record information about the elderly characters they observe. In discussing stereotyping and television, the teacher might ask the class in what contexts a stereotyped portrayal of an older character would not be objectionable. For example, in programs such as "All in the Family" and "Soap," in which all of the characters are special types, are the caricatures of older persons offensive? Does the fact that Johnny Carson includes active, able older persons as guests on his show provide a balance which mutes his stereotypical portrayal of Aunt Blabby?

Figure 1

Television Log

Program or ad	Role of Elderly Character	Active or Passive	Authority Figure?
"Barnaby Jones"	Barnaby Jones—detective in his 70s	Active	Yes
Orville Redenbacher popcorn commercial	Lucy—to repeat what Orville says, to say "eh"	Passive	No
"Tonight Show"	Aunt Blabby—a Johnny Carson caricature	Active but ridicules elderly	No

If the student's exposure is consistent with published research, he or she will find disproportionately few elderly characters, many elderly victims of crime, aging a process to be thwarted, beauty products sold by young women who promise youth and products suggesting bodily degeneration sold by older actors (e.g., laxatives and pain killers). The following are some discussion questions which might be used after students have completed the log.

1. How did you decide that a character was elderly? Did you fall into the trap of only using stereotypic indications of age? Would you include some television personalities as John Wayne, Barnaby Jones, and Walter Cronkite in your "elderly" category? What physical manifestations are used to suggest aging? Wrinkles? Gray or no hair? Loss of hearing? Quivering voice?

2. What were the most common roles for the elderly characters? Grandmothers? Grandfathers? Was there a difference in the roles of the elderly characters in commercials and programs?

3. What was the level of activity for elderly characters? Were they often shown sitting, perhaps in a rocking chair? How did their level of activity compare with that of young characters?

4. What was the nature of the interaction between elderly characters and others in the programs or commercials? Did the elderly seem to be viewed as authority figures by the other characters? Was affection demonstrated to and from the elderly? Were there differences between male and female elderly characters?

5. Ask students to project themselves in the role of TV producers. What would they do to eliminate stereotypic portrayals of the elderly?

6. Ask students to discuss the positive portrayal of older persons on television. Some examples include NBC's "Do Not Go Gently Into That Good Night," CBS's "Too Many Candles," the ABC movie "The Champions." In several series parents have been created for the middle-aged characters (e.g., "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Phyllis," "The Bob Newhart Show," "The Waltons"). Barnaby Jones, Barney Miller, and Maude are examples of older characters who are cast in positive roles.

How We Stereotype the Elderly

Spontaneous nonverbal behavior may demonstrate our stereotypes more dramatically than carefully guarded verbal behavior. Roleplaying, for example, often depends on stereotyped portrayals. Have students

roleplay a communication episode between an elderly person and a young person, between an elderly person and a middle-aged person, and between two elderly persons. The following are some suggested situations:

A young man visits his grandmother in the hospital. ♦

A grandfather and father of a young man discuss the boy's use of marijuana.

Two elderly women, who were friends but haven't seen each other for twenty years, meet for lunch.

A young woman discusses her career plans with her grandfather.

An elderly man interviews for a job with a middle-aged executive.

Two elderly men, both company executives, discuss retirement.

Discussion Questions

1. What physical characteristics were used to suggest age? Quivering voice? Stooped shoulders? Hard of hearing? Slow pace? Are these examples of stereotypes?

2. From the roleplaying, what inferences can you make about the relationship between the two characters? Do they like each other? Are they comfortable together? Do they touch each other? What is the status of each? How do the nonverbals such as sitting vs. standing, body posture, arrangement of furniture demonstrate status?

3. Did the roleplaying suggest that the elderly's values were different from the other age groups? Was there open communication? Or was one party dogmatic?

4. Did the portrayals of the elderly change when the ages of the other partner changed? For example, was the elderly person more stereotyped with the young person than with another elderly person?

Stereotyping in Birthday Cards

Contemporary birthday cards provide an inexpensive means of illustrating negative age stereotyping. The class might assemble a collection of birthday cards, analyze it, and create from it a bulletin board display about stereotyping. The following messages are illustrative:

Good news! They've just come out with an exciting girlie magazine for older men. . . . It has an explanation under each picture!

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Confucius says: He who lays his cards on the table and admits his
true age . . . is not playing with a full deck. ·

People at our age can do anything. : . . Very slowly.

We're at that wonderful age when everything goes . . . our teeth, our
waistlines, our hearing, our arches.

You're getting to that exciting age . . . somewhere between streak-
ing and creaking.

We're not getting older . . . lots of people wear corrective blue jeans.

It is important to note that some cards do communicate a positive
message about aging. For example, one card proclaims, "Everything
looks good on you . . . including another year."

III. Developing Empathy

Social Simulation of Intergenerational Communication

In the January 1979 issue of *Communication Education*, Kathleen
Galvin describes social simulation exercises for use in a course in family
communication. Her exercises can be adapted and used in the unit on
communication and the elderly. The extended family—a group that
includes relatives—is one type of family she describes. A sample family
that emerged in one of her classes was the Matthews—father, mother,
daughters (thirteen and eighteen), son (sixteen), and grandmother
(father's mother).

Songs and the Elderly

Several popular songs communicate a sensitivity about the older
person. The teacher might play some of the following songs for the class
and then discuss the lyrics:

"May You Stay Forever Young"—Bob Dylan

"Fathers and Sons"—Cat Stevens

"When I'm Sixty-Four," "Eleanor Rigby"—The Beatles

"Hello Old Friend"—Eric Clapton

"I Never Thought I'd Live to be 100," "Travelin' Eternity
Road"—Moody Blues'

"Hello in There"—Bette Midler

Films about Aging

Films and videotapes which are sensitive portrayals of the older person

are available at reasonable rental cost. The following films could be used to trigger a classroom discussion.

- *Minnie Remembers*. 16mm, color, 5 min., 1976. Mass Media Ministries, 2116 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218. Minnie talks to God in an introspective poem.

- *Peege*. 16mm, color, 28 min., 1974. Phoenix Films, 743 Alexander Road, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. A family visits the grandmother in a nursing home. Only one young grandson is able to communicate with her.

  Gomberg at 82. Videotape cassette, color, 29 min., n.d. The Public TV Library, 475 L'Enfant Plaza, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20024. Traces the life of an eighty-two-year-old Jew who reflects about his past and present at his granddaughter's wedding.

  Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. 16mm, color, 110 min., 1973. Learning Corporation of America, 711 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10022. Presents the wisdom and experience of a 110-year-old woman who stood up for her principles.

  Grandma Moses. 16mm, color, 22 min., 1950. University of Michigan Audiovisual Education Center, 416 Fourth Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104. Briefly explores the life and work of a woman who received recognition as an artist after she was, by most societal definitions, "old."

  Harold and Maude. 16mm, color, 91 min., 1972. Film Images, 220 W. Forty-second Street, New York, New York 10036. A young man has a love affair with an older woman.

  Queen of the Stardust Ballroom. 16mm, color, 102 min., 1975. Learning Corporation of America, 711 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10022. Shows an older woman who, at the death of her husband, refused to retreat into isolation. Instead, she meets a man, falls in love, and begins a new life.

IV. Facilitating Communication with the Elderly

Bringing the Elderly into the Classroom

One of the most obvious ways to facilitate communication with the elderly is to bring the elderly into the classroom. A panel discussion which focuses on communication problems might be used. If the teacher doesn't have acquaintances who could participate, he or she

could turn to community groups such as senior citizens organizations for volunteers.

Studying Groups which Communicate to and about the Elderly

Students could form research committees to examine various organizations which speak for and to older persons. These student committees could define the organizations' purposes, their memberships, and their outlets for communication (e.g., magazines, newsletters). Each committee could report to the whole class. Representatives of each organization could be invited to come to the class and to participate in the reports. The following are some of the organizations which address the concerns of older persons.

> Gerontological Society (Founded 1945); One Dupont Circle, Suite 520, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-659-4698
>
> National Association for Spanish-speaking Elderly (Asociacion Nacional por Personas Mayores) (1975); 3875 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 401, Los Angeles, California 90005; 213-487-1922; and 1801 K Street, N.W., Suite 1021, Washington, D.C. 20006; 202-466-3595
>
> National Association of Retired Federal Employees (1921); 1533 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-234-0832
>
> National Center on Black Aged (1973); 1730 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001; 202-785-8766; 202-637-8400
>
> National Council on Aging (1950); 1828 L Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-223-6250
>
> National Council of Senior Citizens (1961); 1511 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005; 202-783-6850, 202-347-8800
>
> National Indian Council on Aging, Inc. (1976); P.O. Box 2088, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103
>
> National Retired Teachers Association/American Association of Retired Persons (1947) (1958); 1909 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20049
>
> Urban Elderly Coalition (1972); 1828 L Street, N.W., Suite 505, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-857-0166
>
> Western Gerontological Society (1953); 785 Market Street, Room 616, San Francisco; California 94103; 415-543-2617

The teacher might write to these national organizations to determine

whether local chapters exist in his or her area. The class might also determine the location of Senior Centers and find out at what locations group meals (funded by the Older Americans Act) are served. The area Administration on Aging can provide such information. Churches and civic organizations which organize special programs for older persons might also be contacted.

Creative Expression

Creative expression is an excellent vehicle for stimulating interaction between younger and older people. Reading plays can provide a class with the basis for discussion of the factors involved in intergenerational communication. Students could perform such plays with or for senior citizens groups. Several plays specifically address the relationship between younger and older persons. The following are recommended:

> *Another Conversation with Johnny and Grandpa*—R. Ryan and J. Wiliera
>
> *The Room Upstairs*—Nora Stirling
>
> *On Golden Pond*—Ernest Thompson

Many Senior Centers sponsor "evenings of entertainment." Students might present a brief program at such an evening. Following this presentation, small groups of students and older people might work together creating songs, scripts for plays, or poetry for a follow-up performance. Donald Spence, director of a program in gerontology at the University of Rhode Island, has introduced an activity in which older people are encouraged to create the words and music for songs about their lives.

Because a reader's theater can create a sense of intimacy between performers and audience, but does not require the expense of costumes or props, it is also an effective means of breaking communication barriers. Students might read and perform literature about aging to encourage understanding of the advantages and frustrations of being older. Appropriate selections might include Saroyan's "Waiting for the Bus" or Wordsworth's "Come Grow Old with Me." Some of the songs and plays listed previously could also be adapted for this activity. And the class might enjoy writing and performing an original script. An example of an original effort is "Old Age: Tradition Shelved or Shared," based on interviews conducted with about 200 older people and directed by Maryann Hartman of the University of Maine's Committee on Aging.

Theatrical activities may also focus public attention on society's attitudes toward aging. For example, the Gray Panthers presented a series of skits at the 1975 American Medical Association convention in Atlantic City. In one of the skits, a greedy doctor was shown selling older patients to high-bidding nursing home owners. One of the homes bidding was labelled "The One Nurse Home."

Oral History

To encourage communication with the elderly, assign students to interview an elderly relative and record an oral history of that person. The class as a whole could develop a set of questions for the interview. (The teacher could review some interview techniques in conjunction with this activity.) Some suggested areas for questions include:

A description of daily life when they were young

What was school like?

How much money did you make?

How were daily chores done, e.g., cooking, shopping?

How did young people spend their free time?

What was your first job?

What could you buy with that money?

Major technological changes

What were your favorite radio programs when you were young?

When did you first ride in a car?

Did you have indoor plumbing all your life?

Were you ever without a telephone? What did you do to communicate with others?

How was information handled without computers?

How did you entertain yourselves without TV?

Memories of historical events

First airplane flight?

Sinking of the *Titantic*?

First presidential election you can remember?

Pearl Harbor?

V-J Day?

Depression?

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What were your values when you were my age?

Did you want to go on in school? Did you? Why or why not?

What kinds of jobs were available to you?

Did you and your friends drink and smoke?

What were the "rules" for dating?

What was the nature of any conflicts between you and your parents?

Does your experience influence the way in which you analyze contemporary events?

Have you grown more conservative or liberal?

How do you believe young people today compare to your generation?

What changes in education (or the work force) do you see in the future?

What is it like to be older?

Do you feel old?

What age would you like to be?

What is the best and worst thing about being your age?

Are your satisfied with your relationships with your family?

To create the basis for comparative class discussion, it's important that there be a core of questions which every student asks. Each student, of course, will tailor some questions to the specific background and interests of the interviewee. After the questions are developed, the form of the presentation must be determined. The best method is to tape record the entire interview and then play selected portions in an oral report. However, if tape recording equipment is unavailable, students could take detailed notes during the interview and report back to the class from these notes.

The reports and subsequent discussions of the oral histories may be used to summarize the unit. The following examples from several oral histories are included to demonstrate the richness of this material for illustrating many of the points discussed throughout the unit.

The elderly can be guilty of stereotyping themselves. For example, a great-grandmother told her granddaughter:

I don't take little babies in my arms now, as much as I love to hold them. I remember when I was young I was scared to death if

> you put me near an old person. I remember my first memories. I
> used to love Aunt Emily (who was younger) and I was scared to
> death about Aunt Beck (who was older). And I was ashamed of that.
> But I wouldn't want to scare a baby or a child.

Students may learn that they have to explore language to be sure they understand meaning. For example, in one interview, a ninety-two-year-old woman was asked if as a teenager she considered going on to school. Higher education had different meanings for the two generations: "People then looked on high school as you look on college now."

Young people may gain some insight into their personal histories from these interviews. A young woman learned the following from interviewing her great-grandmother:

> When I was eighteen months, my mother died, and I went to live
> with my Aunt Emily. She was one of the loveliest people I ever met.
> She was narrow-minded all her life. But that doesn't make any
> difference to a child growing up. She was like my own mother. She
> was a teacher. I used to go to school with her and sit in a rocking
> chair by her desk.

And her grandmother:

> My father had the store and two farms. He was county
> commissioner for eight years and then he was state tobacco
> inspector in Baltimore for four years. That was a governor's
> appointment. He'd leave on Mondays and not be back until
> Saturdays.

The interview might provide a forum for discussing what life was like for these elders when they were younger.

> We had a pump, an iron pump, and we pumped up every bit of
> water we used. In our rooms we had the big basins with the pitchers.
> In the kitchen we had a bucket of water with a dipper in it. We used
> that for drinking water. We put it on the stove and boiled it to get
> hot water. We had no bathtubs. We used a big tin tub in one of the
> back rooms. We had to put the water in and take the water out. The
> first person I can remember who had a bathtub in his house was a
> Mr. Lyon that lived near Surrattsville and two of his daughters were
> in my class. I used to be invited to their home for parties. They had a
> bath in the house. And I thought how wonderful it was because no
> one else I knew had one.

> I was born in 1886. I had four brothers. The youngest one died.
> And only one sister. They used to tell me I should have been a boy. I
> used to love to run around the yard and play baseball. We had a
> game I don't think anyone has heard of since we were kids. It was
> called Lacko. You'd draw a line and separate the kids into two

groups. And each group would have to stay behind its line. But everyone tried to steal the other side's shoes. You see you had to make your own amusement then. On Sunday other children and other families used to come and visit you. Hide and seek, too. There were so many places to hide because the area wasn't developed with houses all over like it is now.

The student might also learn what it was like to live through events which the student has studied. One student, for example, asked a seventy-two-year-old male about the world wars and the depression:

What do you remember about the war?
Which war are you talking about?
The first.
The First World War, I don't remember too much about it. I know that, how old was I? I was about fifteen or sixteen. It was between 1914 and 1918. I was out in the hay field and whistles were blowing, and I didn't know what it was all about. And it turned out to be the Armistice. That's about all I remember about it.
What about the Second World War?
Well, of course, the Second World War I lived in Chicago, and I remember that quite distinctly. But, having had a child, I was on the list, I forget what you call it now, I had registered with the draft board, and it was just a question of being called. My number would have been up in a month but then peace was declared.
What do you remember about the depression?
That's very vivid in my mind as it probably is in many people's minds my age. The firm that I was with sent me to Chicago, and I was living in a rooming house. And I remember that we were getting complete meals—soup to nuts—for a quarter, dinners. And we had, the office I worked for, had two letters a day and nothing else to do, and the firm finally cut us down to three days a week without pay and that's when I started to play golf. I had nothing else to do, so...
Wasn't it expensive to play golf?
Played golf, fifty-four holes, for twenty cents a day. All you wanted.
What about the food during the depression? Were there things you wouldn't get?
No, I don't recall. The food was good. Very cheap.

One point that older people seem to want to make is that growing older didn't make them become a different person. For example:

If elderly people are well, I don't see why children should be frightened of them. Elderly people are just people.

But Aunt Beck wasn't concerned about religion just because she was old. She was like that all her life.

The interviews may also reveal the interviewees' attitudes toward aging:

> What age would you like to be?
> Well, it would be nice to be twenty, but know then what I know now and have then what I have. I would have very little worldly goods, but it would be nice to be twenty again.
> Do you feel old?
> Not a bit. Not a bit, no. I don't want to be termed or thought of as being in a category or group of old people or anything like that. It depresses me to even think that.

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