

GSA's 75th Anniversary: Special Article



Attitudes Toward Aging: A Glance Back at Research Developments Over the Past 75 Years

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Abstract

With global aging, it is crucial to understand how older adults and the process of aging are viewed by members of society. These attitudes can often influence how older adults are treated. Since the *Journal of Gerontology* was founded, we have gained increasing insights into attitudes toward aging, with several notable research developments, including clearer conceptualization of different types of aging attitudes (e.g., life-domain-specific attitudes and self-perceptions of aging), a wider variety of measurements, better understanding of how different social determinants shape aging attitudes, and more sophisticated investigations of cultural variance and invariance in aging attitudes. In this article, we highlight these major shifts in the field of aging attitudes in the past 75 years, discuss the contributions of these developments, and point to potential future directions.

Keywords: Aging attitudes, Age stereotypes, Self-perceptions of aging, Views on aging

Attitudes or perceptions toward aging, despite their abstractness, have real-life consequences, including their impacts on how older adults are received and treated by others (Palmore, 1999). The *Journal of Gerontology* has been contributing to this important line of research with numerous publications related to aging attitudes, including an article in its very first issue (Simmons, 1946). Simmons' article described older adults as “a problem of every human society” (p. 72) that was absent in “primitive” societies but emerged in modern times. Simmons highlighted that older adults were more well-respected in ancient societies because old age was rare and older members often served as a repository of local traditions and knowledge. In modern societies, changes are more rapid. The aging population has increased, and older adults' knowledge and experiences have become less relevant and thus less valued. This view provides an explanation as to why individuals of all ages,

and societies at large, have been shown to hold more negative attitudes toward older adults than toward middle-aged and younger adults (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). Simmons (1946) also suggested that aging attitudes were shaped by societal needs and could be regarded as products of culture. In the 75 years since the Simmons article was published, attitudes toward older adults, and how researchers conceptualize and study such attitudes, have seen several shifts (Figure 1). There are many apparent conceptual and methodological differences between earlier works, such as Simmons' piece, and later works in aging attitude research. Therefore, in celebration of GSA's 75th anniversary, we revisit the literature on attitudes toward aging since the year the *Journal of Gerontology* was founded. Specifically, we aim to illuminate developments in conceptualizing, measuring, and contextualizing attitudes toward aging over the past 75 years.

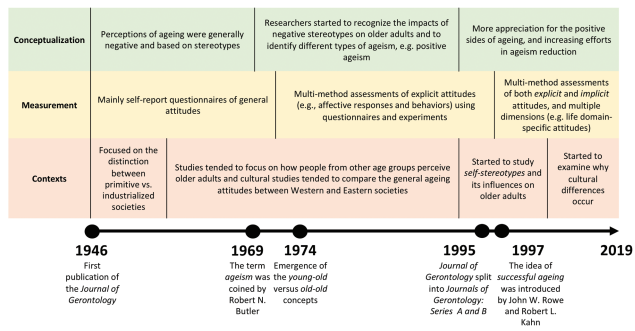


Figure 1. This timeline illustrates major research developments in the attitudes toward aging literature.

Conceptual Developments: Generalized Aging Attitudes and the Concept of Ageism

From the 1940s until the mid-1960s, discourse on aging in society often centered on the “problem of the aged” (e.g., Govan, 1951; Simmons, 1946). Particularly in Western cultures that prized self-sufficiency and were more youth-oriented, the perception that older adults were no longer useful to society formed the basis for prejudice and discrimination (Govan, 1951). This might be attributable to the fact that, in industrialized societies, given the general association of aging with increasing demand for resources, lower productivity, physical illness, and psychological problems (Govan, 1951), the aged population was viewed as a significant social cost, leading to a fear of aging, and resulting in age-related discrimination (Tuckman & Lorge, 1952). For example, stereotypes of older adults in the workforce as being unproductive, hazardous, and resistant to change were in line with younger populations’ widely held notion of “the aged as a menace” (Tuckman & Lorge, 1952). The term *ageism* was coined in 1969 to describe these stereotypes. Ageism was later given its classical definition as “a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination of people because they are old” (Butler, 1975).

In contrast to these stereotypical perceptions of old age, older adults in many industrialized societies from the 1960s onward were increasingly healthy, affluent, and socially engaged. With this came the recognition of the *young-old* (aged 55–75 years) as a distinct life stage characterized by continued meaningful engagement with life, with frailty and expendability being attributed only to the *oldest-old* (Neugarten, 1974). Later theories such as *successful aging* (Rowe & Kahn, 1997) emphasized the potential for maintaining physical, cognitive, and social functioning well into late life, and called for the reduction of ageist attitudes.

One response to this call was to broaden the concept of ageism (Palmore, 1999), acknowledging the existence of positive ageism and recognizing that ageism can also impact younger adults. In other words, the definition of ageism shifted from focusing on negative views of older adults specifically to “any prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of any age group.” Furthermore, there has been increasing recognition and awareness of ageism

in the forms of oppressive social relations, images, and discourses. Building on such realizations, researchers have called for those in the field to examine their own research practices and assumptions, noting, for example, how questionnaires used in aging research may reinforce ageist language and stereotypes (Schaie, 1993). The need to examine how cultural assumptions and power relations influence whether an “ageist” label is applied to a given phenomenon has also been noted (Snellman, 2018).

Measurement Developments: Increasing Specificity and Multidimensionality

The broadening of the definition of ageism has also shaped tools for measuring attitudes toward older adults. Early self-report measures focused on general aging attitudes and stereotypes. They paved the way for multimethod assessments from the 1970s onward that included affective responses (e.g., positive/negative adjectives), cognitions (e.g., memory failure attributions), and behaviors (e.g., coding of real or imagined interactions; Wilson, Errasti-Ibarrondo, & Low, 2019), as well as *implicit association* and priming techniques developed in the late 1990s to capture, or even manipulate, unconscious attitudes not amenable to self-report (Levy, 2003).

Major developments have centered on the multidimensionality of aging attitudes. Meta-analyses have shown, for example, that ageist biases are larger in some domains, such as perceptions of physical attractiveness, than in others, such as willingness to engage in conversation (Kite et al., 2005). Across multiple cultures and assessment methods, older adults have been associated with both negative and positive attributes (e.g., incompetent but warm; Wilson et al., 2019). However, even seemingly positive stereotypes (e.g., *benevolent ageism*) have been shown to hinder older adults’ autonomy and lower their status in society (North & Fiske, 2012).

Contextual Moderators and Self-views of Aging

Given the significant impacts of attitudes toward older adults, there have been numerous attempts to investigate what shape these attitudes. Several lines of research have identified contextual factors that shape aging attitudes; these include the amount and type of information provided about the older adult target, the social distance between the perceiver and target, and individual differences such as gender and socioeconomic status (e.g., Kite et al., 2005). In addition, age is an important predictor of attitudes toward older adults. Younger individuals’ views of older adults have been shown to be more negative than older individuals’ self-views (Kite et al., 2005). Researchers have invoked frameworks such as *terror management theory* (death anxiety) and *social identity theory* (identification

with a positive, distinct in-group) to explain how ageism manifests differently across age groups (Bodner, 2009). For example, compared with old-old adults, young-old adults may show more negative aging attitudes due to their resistance against being identified as “old” and their desire to identify with the in-group that “stays young and active.”

Individuals also internalize societal attitudes toward older adults such that these attitudes become one’s own self-views of aging. Since the 1990s, research on *self-views* of aging has revealed how aging self-stereotypes and expectations regarding one’s own aging process shape physical health, cognitive functioning, and subjective well-being, through pathways such as internalization of negative attitudes (e.g., illness attributions), and expectations regarding future functioning and life satisfaction (Levy, 2003). Notably, ageist self-views have been shown to shape aging trajectories above and beyond the noted effects of externally imposed ageism, or others’ ageist attitudes, in the workplace, in health care, and in popular culture (North & Fiske, 2012).

Context Specificity: Examining Societal and Cultural Differences in Aging Attitudes

In the 1940s, the issue of aging attitudes started to become a concern in industrialized societies, mainly in the West. Researchers during this period also began to understand negative aging attitudes from a cross-cultural perspective. The most influential argument was derived from the comparison between “primitive” and industrialized societies (i.e., Simmons, 1946). The argument was that older adults were glorified by others in primitive societies due to their perceived usefulness and contributions (e.g., traditional knowledge, supernatural powers), but they were devalued in more modern societies when these same skills became less important after industrialization. This idea laid a foundation for later cross-cultural studies on aging attitudes.

Chandler (1949) brought attention to the West versus East comparison by speculating that aging may receive more respect, value, and positive attitudes from others in traditional Chinese societies than in Western cultures. The underlying reasons can be traced back to cultural differences in desirable qualities. Traditional Chinese emphasize peacefulness, moderation, and simplicity while Westerners pursue excitement, efficiency, and transformation. Qualities desirable in the Chinese society are much more accessible to older adults compared to qualities being praised by the West. For example, the concept of successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997) is in line with Western values of productivity and independence but may not align with Chinese views emphasizing intergenerational interdependence. Moreover, the glorification of wisdom and authority brought by aging also make aging more desirable in the Chinese society. Recent cross-cultural studies have strengthened this argument by citing differences in self-construal (individualistic vs collectivistic) between the West and the East (e.g.,

Löckenhoff et al., 2015). According to this perspective, aging is more favorable in the East than in the West, as the interpersonal skills and social roles prioritized in Eastern societies do not exhibit age-related declines.

However, later empirical research testing these ideas showed mixed findings. One of the first cross-cultural studies that took an empirical approach found overall negative perceptions towards older adults across nations, regardless of whether Western or Eastern (Arnhoff, Leon, & Lorge, 1964). More recent empirical studies produced results that contrasted with theoretical predictions. For example, a study conducted in 2009 on 26 cultures found that more positive views of aging by others were reported in Asian nations than in Western nations, but that those in the East also held more negative perceptions of others’ aging trajectories for wisdom (Löckenhoff et al., 2009). However, North and Fiske (2015) found in a meta-analysis that individuals in collectivistic cultures held more negative perceptions towards older adults and aging than those in individualistic cultures.

These inconclusive cross-cultural findings invited more studies to investigate the mechanisms underlying cultural variance and invariance in aging attitudes. Löckenhoff and colleagues (2015) suggested that cross-cultural comparisons should go beyond the West-East distinction. Specifically, regardless of whether East or West, regions that underwent rapid industrialization and population aging might hold more negative perceptions towards older adults and aging compared to those in which industrialization was more recent and less widespread (Löckenhoff et al., 2015). Factors such as economic trends, population aging, social transformation, sample characteristics, geographical region (rural vs urban) and subculture within a nation (Löckenhoff et al., 2015) should be considered in future cross-cultural studies on aging attitudes.

In addition, attitudes toward aging may be determined by what a given culture considers to be meaningful in old age (Fung, 2013). A recent study by Tsai and colleagues (2018) found that European American middle-aged and older adults valued high arousal positive affect more than their Chinese American and Hong Kong Chinese counterparts. Since activities that evoke high arousal positive affect (such as climbing up a mountain) are harder to sustain in old age than activities that evoke low arousal positive affect (such as practicing tai chi), European Americans’ relatively high emphasis on high arousal positive affect was found to account for their more negative self-views of aging, compared with Chinese Americans and Hong Kong Chinese. Indeed, experimentally increasing valuation of high arousal positive affect led to less positive personal views of aging regardless of culture. Another study (Fung et al., 2015) found that even positive portrayals of old age could backfire when older adults perceived these portrayals as unrealistic, once again suggesting that meaningfulness matters.

Lastly, the domains in which attitudes toward aging are assessed may also explain cross-cultural differences in

attitudes toward aging. Researchers have recently highlighted the importance of evaluating aging attitudes in a multifaceted way (e.g., Löckenhoff et al., 2015; Voss, Kornadt, Hess, Fung, & Rothermund, 2018), for example, by evaluating aging stereotypes in eight life domains (including “personality and way of living,” “financial situation and dealing with money related issues,” “friends and acquaintances”). Cultures could hold similar or different attitudes toward aging in each of these domains. Although Voss and colleagues (2018) found, in general, more negative views of others’ aging in China compared to in Germany and the United States, these cross-cultural differences were absent or reversed in domains such as friends, personality, and finances. In addition to confirming that attitudes toward aging are domain-specific, these findings suggest that the emergence of cross-cultural differences in attitudes toward aging may depend on the importance that each culture attaches to these specific domains.

Conclusion

Since the *Journal of Gerontology*’s inception in 1946, research on attitudes toward aging has grown in terms of conceptualization, measurement, and contextualization. Developments in conceptualizing aging attitudes (e.g., ageism) have acknowledged the existence of both positive and negative attitudes toward aging and older adults, which has provided the basis for later research. Developments in measurement have supported the idea that empirical works need to be more precise and able to capture different types of aging attitudes (e.g., attitudes in different domains, explicit vs implicit attitudes). Attitudes toward aging have also been contextualized in terms of the characteristics of the perceivers and/or targets and the social or cultural context in which attitudes are measured.

Looking back at the research on attitudes toward aging over the past 75 years, it is an impressive collective achievement. However, there are still gaps in the literature that await future studies. For instance, it will be important to understand how different types of aging attitudes may manifest differently under different contexts. A more comprehensive model or theory may help to synthesize these individual aspects of aging attitudes and better predict the development and outcomes of ageism. Moreover, interdisciplinary efforts to develop effective ageism reduction interventions or programs are crucial for creating more age-friendly societies. A good example is the Reframing Aging Initiative launched in 2014, which aims to counter ageism by translating empirical findings into practical tips for the general public. Finally, it is important to note that research itself may perpetuate ageism. While ageist research practices are more noticeable in earlier studies (e.g., in word choices for scale items, and in framing aging as a “problem”), current work could also benefit from reflections on researchers’ assumptions and decisions (e.g., empiricist and interpretive perspectives) at different stages of the research process (see Lessenich et al.,

2018 for an example). We look forward to future developments in research on attitudes toward aging in the next 75 years and beyond.

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