

# The Relative Impact of Age and Attractiveness Stereotypes on Persuasion<sup>1</sup>

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The relative impact of the old-age and attractiveness stereotypes on persuasion was investigated. College students read essays that contained either cogent or specious arguments that were attributed either to young or old, socially attractive or unattractive authors. Evaluations of the essay itself were affected only by the quality of the arguments presented. Argument quality and attractiveness interacted to determine perceptions of the author and opinions on the position advocated in the essay: attractive authors were rated higher and were more persuasive than unattractive authors when the essay was strong, but were derogated and unpersuasive relative to unattractive authors when the essay was weak. Age of the author had an impact only on a few of the author-evaluation scales. A hierarchy of stereotype potency in which social attractiveness is prepotent over age is offered tentatively.

**Key Words:** Attitudes and aging, Stereotype dominance, Persuasion

THE goal of the present study was to explore how young peoples' personal opinions on an issue were affected by persuasive communications from elderly adults. Although some research has focused on how young people evaluate the work of elderly persons (e.g., Walsh & Connor, 1979), and some research has explored the differential susceptibility of people of different ages as message recipients (e.g., Herzog, 1979), little work has focused on how effective elderly sources are at influencing the personal opinions of young people.

Two factors in addition to the age of the communication source were manipulated in the present study: social attractiveness of the source, and the cogency of the arguments used in the appeal. These variables were chosen because they have been shown to have important effects on persuasion (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), are likely to be naturally occurring concomitants of persuasive communications of elderly persons in the real world, and are of considerable theoretical significance.

In the present study one of three outcomes was considered likely. First, a negative stereotype of elderly people (e.g., McTavish, 1971) might decrease influence relative to younger sources, and a positive stereotype of the socially attractive (e.g.,

Berscheid & Walster, 1974) might increase influence relative to unattractive sources. Second, the two stereotypes might interact with the communication content manipulation such that attractiveness and age would affect the extent to which recipients process (or ignore) the arguments presented. Finally, one stereotype might dominate the other (much as the old-age stereotype dominated ethnic stereotypes in Bassili & Reil, 1981).

## METHOD

*Participants.* — The participants were 110 male and 110 female undergraduates at a midwestern university who received extra credit in their introductory psychology course for being in the study. Systematic data were not collected with respect to age, but all participants appeared to be of traditional college age.

*Procedure.* — Participants were told that students in an unspecified undergraduate continuing education course had written essays on the issue of whether comprehensive examinations should be given in a student's major area of study as a prerequisite for obtaining the bachelor's degree. It was explained that continuing education courses were composed of a very heterogeneous group of students. Participants were then informed that their evaluations of the essays would be compared with those of faculty members in the continuing education program.

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In addition to the eight factorial conditions (age of the essay author  $\times$  social attractiveness of the author  $\times$  essay argument quality), person (photograph) was nested within each combination of age and attractiveness, creating 16 conditions. Also, two control conditions were administered in which the strong or weak essay was presented without any description of the author; hence, evaluations were based only on information within the essays. Participants were assigned randomly to one of these 18 conditions.

In brief, the strong version of the essay provided cogent arguments in support of the examination (e.g., businesses would prefer to hire students who had passed the examination). In contrast, the weak version offered personal opinion and specious examples in support of the examination (e.g., a friend of the author's had taken a comprehensive examination and had benefited; see Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, for details).

In a folder with each essay was a picture and brief description concerning the author of the essay. From a large pool of photographs, two photos were selected unanimously by a group of students to be representative of each of the four combinations of attractive and unattractive young and elderly adult men. The four descriptions stated the age (21 vs. 68) and implied the social attractiveness of the essay author: name (Michael Baker vs. Herman Baker), family background (educated vs. relatively uneducated parents), and hobbies (e.g., photography vs. watching television), for the attractive and unattractive descriptions, respectively.

Rating scale measures designed to assess the essay's creativity, ideas, style, writing, arguments, and persuasiveness were averaged to form a general measure of essay evaluation. Participants then rated the general concept "comprehensive exams" on four semantic differential scales anchored by good-bad, beneficial-harmful, foolish-wise, and favorable-unfavorable; these measures were in turn averaged to form a general measure of participants' personal agreement with the recommendation made by the essay author, (i.e., issue evaluation). Finally, rating scale measures of the essay author's intelligence, sensitivity, talent, attractiveness, dynamism, open-mindedness, generosity, success, energy, independence, likability, similarity to the subject, and credibility were averaged to form an index of author evaluation.

## RESULTS

An analysis of variance including person (photograph) as a nested factor indicated that photographs

Table 1. Cell Means for Essay, Issue, and Author Evaluation Measures in Experimental and Control Groups

Group	Type of Evaluation		
	Essay	Issue	Author
Strong argument			
Attractive	8.37 <sub>a</sub>	7.41 <sub>a</sub>	7.74 <sub>a</sub>
Old	8.37	7.46	7.85
Young	8.38	7.37	7.64
Unattractive	8.13 <sub>a</sub>	6.78 <sub>ab</sub>	6.75 <sub>b</sub> *
Old	8.65	6.94	7.11
Young	7.61	6.62	6.40
Control	8.20	7.01	7.54
Weak argument			
Attractive	5.95 <sub>b</sub>	5.87 <sub>b</sub>	6.49 <sub>b</sub> *
Old	6.07	5.86	6.31
Young	5.84	5.88	6.67
Unattractive	5.65 <sub>b</sub>	6.30 <sub>ab</sub>	6.37 <sub>b</sub>
Old	5.81	6.23	6.53
Young	5.50	6.37	6.21
Control	4.90	5.48	5.67

Note. Argument by Attractiveness means (collapsed across age) that are within a given column and do not have common subscripts are significantly different at the .05 level by the Newman-Keuls procedure. Asterisks refer to Dunnett tests between such groups and the appropriate control group within that column.

\* $p < .05$ .

did not produce any significant effects on the three major measures. Thus, cells were collapsed across photographs in the analyses reported. Cell means for each measure are presented in Table 1.

A  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  analysis of variance on the measure of essay evaluation produced only one significant main effect. Participants rated the essay with strong arguments ( $M = 8.25$ ) higher than the essay with weak arguments ( $M = 5.90$ ),  $F(1,164) = 83.02$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .324$ .

On the crucial measure of issue evaluation, a similar main effect for argument quality was obtained. Not surprisingly, students exposed to the strong essay ( $M = 7.09$ ) approved of the senior comprehensive examination proposal more than subjects exposed to the weak essay ( $M = 6.08$ ),  $F(1,166) = 18.8$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .093$ . Importantly, however, this main effect must be interpreted in the context of a significant essay by attractiveness interaction,  $F(1,166) = 5.24$ ,  $p < .03$ ,  $\omega^2 = .022$ . This interaction revealed that the impact of argument quality on the subjects' personal attitudes about the senior comprehensive exam issue was significant only when the author was high in social attractiveness (see Newman-Keuls analysis in Table 1).

An analysis of the author evaluation index yielded a main effect for the attractiveness manipulation.  $F(1,167) = 8.33, p < .004, \omega^2 = .036$ . Consistent with the attractiveness stereotype, the attractive authors ( $M = 7.11$ ) were rated higher than the unattractive authors ( $M = 6.56$ ). Secondly, a main effect for essay was found on the overall author evaluation index. Authors of the strong essay ( $M = 7.24$ ) were rated higher than authors of the weak essay ( $M = 6.43$ ).  $F(1,167) = 18.09, p < .0001, \omega^2 = .084$ . In addition, an essay by attractiveness interaction was obtained,  $F(1,167) = 4.89, p < .03, \omega^2 = .019$ . On the subscales on which this interaction was also significant, attractive authors were rated higher than unattractive authors when the essay was strong, but when the essay was weak attractive authors were derogated relative to unattractive authors.

Four of the 13 subscales comprising the author evaluation index were the only measures in the entire experiment to show any significant effects for the manipulation of the age of the author. Relative to young authors, the older authors were rated as more intelligent, talented, energetic, and independent.

Finally, each of the essay and attractiveness treatment combinations (collapsed across age) was compared with the appropriate essay-only control cell. When the essay quality was strong, attractive authors tended to produce more favorable perceptions on all measures than when the author's attractiveness was unspecified, whereas unattractive authors tended to produce more negative perceptions. When the essay quality was weak, however, any kind of specific author information tended to enhance the favorability of perceptions on all measures (see means and Dunnett analysis in Table 1). This suggests that when a tangible person is presented, it may be more difficult to express negative attitudes toward him or her.

#### DISCUSSION

A major result of the present study was that the persuasiveness of a socially attractive source was highly dependent on the cogency of the arguments presented in the essay, whereas the quality of what an unattractive source said had no impact upon attitudes. This differential effect of attractiveness on persuasion in the presence of weak versus strong arguments has not been reported previously in the literature (prior studies of attractiveness have not tested the effects of weak arguments). This effect, however, has counterparts in other studies of attrac-

tiveness (e.g., Sigall & Ostrove, 1975). Taken together, these studies suggest that judgments and attitudes toward the attractive will typically be more polarized than judgments and attitudes toward the unattractive.

Another major finding of the present study was the absence of any evidence for the operation of a negative old-age stereotype. It is possible that this result might be explained by the predominance of the attractiveness stereotype over the old-age stereotype, in line with a similar finding by Bassili and Reil (1981). These researchers found that elderly adults were characterized only on the basis of their old age, whereas younger target persons were characterized in terms of a number of other stereotypes (e.g., ethnic group and occupation). It is interesting to note that in the present study a negative old-age stereotype did not operate, yet in a similar essay evaluation situation Walsh and Connor (1979) found evidence for such an age bias. The fact that Walsh and Connor did not specify the social attractiveness of the essay authors as in the present study is consistent with the idea that the operation of an age stereotype in an essay evaluation situation depends on the absence of the potentially more powerful social attractiveness information. Combining the results of the present study with Bassili and Reil's may even suggest a hierarchy of stereotype potency with the old-age stereotype dominating certain ethnic and occupational stereotypes and with social attractiveness dominating the old-age stereotype.

On the other hand, it is also possible that our participants held no negative old-age stereotype in the present situation. In fact, there is some evidence from the author evaluation measures that the elderly men enrolled in a continuing education class were viewed more positively than their younger counterparts. This finding is consistent with the complexities and limitations in generalizing the negative old-age stereotype (McTavish, 1971). Further research in this area seems warranted in order to distinguish between these possibilities.

An important implication of the present study appears to be that attractive and unattractive representations of elderly adults produce results quite different from one another and quite different from the cases in which attractiveness is neutral or unspecified (e.g., Walsh & Connor, 1979). As is the case with many other parameters affected by aging (Kausler, 1982), individual differences in attractiveness may increase with increasing age, whereas the average level of attractiveness simultaneously declines as a cohort grows older. Thus, it is possible

that many of the negative attitudes expressed toward elderly people, in the first place, arise from culturally based perceptions of decreasing social attractiveness as the cohort ages. At the same time, more socially attractive elderly persons may be treated fairly and taken seriously in contrast to the less attractive members of their cohort.

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