In first encounters, age is one of the earliest characteristics we notice about other people (Fiske 1998; Kite, Deaux, and Miele 1991). Conscious or not, noticing age drives our interactions with others. Age seems to answer: How should I address them? What are their political views? What do they know about popular culture? Will they be competent? Socially aware? How slowly should I talk? How loudly? From an individual’s perceived age, we infer social and cognitive competencies, political and religious beliefs, and physical abilities. These inferences guide how we behave and what information we seek, heed, and remember.

Age is far from the only social marker that shapes our attitudes toward other people. We form opinions based on sex, race, and religion, among other social categories. But unlike these other categories, old age is one that most of us eventually join. For the most part, people do not move from one gender, racial, ethnic, or religious category to another. Moreover, stereotyping people based on their age, unlike these other groupings, goes largely unchallenged and even unnoticed in the United States. We disparage elderly people without fear of censure. Indeed, noticing a person’s age early in a social encounter is not surprising or inherently offensive. It is what we do with that information that can be destructive. As Butler (1980) notes in an edition of the Journal of Social Issues devoted to the topic, ageism, like racism and sexism, becomes institutionalized, affecting hiring decisions, medical care, and social policy.

Many people approach old age with dread. What was once viewed as a natural process is now seen as a social problem. Television portrayals only 1.5 percent of its characters as elderly, and most of them in minor roles (Zebrowitz and Montepare 2000). Older adults are also more likely than any other age group to appear in television and film as conduits for comic relief, exploiting stereotypes of physical, cognitive, and sexual ineffectiveness (Zebrowitz and Montepare 2000). Today in America, we no
longer see our elders as sources of wisdom but as feeble yet lovable, doddering but dear.

Our goal in writing this chapter is to shed light on the social-psychological underpinnings of stereotyping processes, contents, and functions and to use this as a scaffold to discuss stereotyping of elderly people. We begin by elucidating the systematic nature of the processes of stereotyping, including those of older people. After process, we discuss the less examined area of stereotype content. We suggest that content, including the content of stereotypes about elderly people, is systematic. Finally, the chapter examines the functions served by stereotyping and discusses the conditions most likely to elicit the use of stereotypic information in impression formation. Overall, the processes, contents, and functions of elderly stereotypes fit well with the general principles of stereotyping.

Social-Psychological Processes of Stereotyping

Processes of stereotyping primarily address cognition. One context for this comes from the traditional tripartite view that three mechanisms constitute attitudes: affect, behavior, and cognition (Breckler 1984; Eagly and Chaiken 1998). In category-based attitudes, these are represented as prejudice (affective), discrimination (behavioral), and stereotyping (cognitive). Ageism contains the same three mechanisms. This chapter focuses primarily on stereotypes, which are cognitive structures that store our beliefs and expectations about the characteristics of members of social groups, and stereotyping, the process of applying stereotypic information.

Stereotypes develop over time as people perceive their changing environments, interpret the perceived information, and encode it in memory. Biased by various cognitive processes, these collections of beliefs are later retrieved for use in interpreting social cues, and consequently directing how we behave in social interactions (Stangor and Schaller 1996). Accurate or not, stereotypes guide our social behavior and often govern what information we seek, heed, and remember (for a review, see Fiske 1998). At the root of stereotyping is our impulse to assign objects, events, and people to meaningful classes, about which we have established beliefs and expectations.

Categorization and Stereotype Formation

Human functioning requires cognitive categorization. To make sense of the world, we group objects and events based on their similar features. Identifying these shared characteristics serves to reduce the amount of redundant data to be processed and provides additional useful information (for a review, see Fiske 1998). If we walked into a retirement home without the ability to categorize people into residents, staff, and visitors, we would quickly be confused and overloaded by the complexities.

Just as we cluster objects and events based on perceived similarities, we cluster people based on perceived similarities. In his classic volume, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport suggests, “The human mind must think with the aid of categories. Once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudgment. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends on it” (1954, p. 20).

Perceived category membership does not necessarily result from an individual’s actual possession of necessary category traits. Instead, it is based on our perceptions of how well a person fits a certain social group, based on characteristics we believe to represent a category. Two established models have explained how we determine the degree of fit: the prototype model and the exemplar model. The former was the first to suggest that categories do not have rigid boundaries and compulsory criteria, but that we subjectively categorize people based on how well we perceive them to resemble the average category member, or prototype (Cantor and Mischel 1979). A prototype need not be an actual person, but instead an imagined individual who embodies the central tendencies of the group’s key attributes. Common experience suggests that the prototype elderly person may be portrayed on television as slow, confused, bent, and dowdy, characteristics that quickly categorize the character.

Whereas prototypes are usually abstractions derived from an individual’s collected experiences with the category, exemplars are memories of actual people or events. Ronald Reagan, one’s grandmother, and Norman Thayer (Henry Fonda’s *On Golden Pond* character) all might be elderly exemplars. The exemplar model suggests that we have multiple exemplars for each social category and that we assign membership to individuals who resemble many of the category’s exemplars (see Fiske and Taylor 1991 for a review). The field acknowledges that neither of the models can account for all social cognitive representations; different situations call for different processes. But the shared contribution of the prototype and exemplar models to our understanding of stereotyping is that mental representations of social categories have nebulous boundaries and are the baselines people use to organize and construct their social taxonomies. Thus, the category elderly people is not defined by necessary and sufficient rules; a 70 year old who plays bridge and runs
marathons might or might not qualify, depending on resemblance to one’s abstract prototype or specific exemplars.

Several consequences follow from mental representations of social categories (Mackie et al. 1996). First, we perceive people as more similar to each other when they are presented as members of the same group (within-group assimilation) and less similar when presented as members of different groups (between-group contrast) (Allen and Wilder 1979). Thus, two people over age 80 would be viewed as more similar compared to 20 year olds, but as quite different if one were a Japanese person in a group of Japanese businessmen and the other a German person in a group of German tourists.

Second, we perceive out-groups as less variable than in-groups, a phenomenon termed the out-group homogeneity effect (Park and Rothbart 1982). Young people perceive all old people to be alike, varying very little on stereotypic traits such as political affiliation and open-mindedness. Similarly, older people may see teenagers as indistinguishable on dimensions such as discipline and thoughtfulness.

Third, the perceived contrast between groups is evaluative, favoring the in-group (Tajfel et al. 1971). Young people make favorable in-group comparisons to older counterparts, evaluating the in-group more positively on relevant trait dimensions, such as attractiveness and wit.

Levels of Categorization
People perceive groups at various levels of specificity. Usually when we refer to social groups, such as “elderly people,” we are speaking of the superordinate, or global, level of categorization. But sometimes superordinate categories splinter into meaningful subcategories, which we will refer to as subtypes (Taylor 1981). The next section describes some elderly subtypes, but first note that relative to individual instances and superordinate-level representations of a category, subtypes occur at an intermediate level of generality (Ryan, Park, and Judd 1996). Because our cognitive representations of out-groups are less differentiated than our representations of in-groups, we are less likely to use a subordinate level for out-groups (Park, Ryan, and Judd 1992). However, when superordinate categories impart too little data even for out-groups, people sometimes develop subtypes (Stangor et al. 1992), which provide richer information about how to behave in specific situations, thereby amplifying predictive potential.

Subtypes develop in response to stereotype-incongruent information (Fiske and Taylor 1991). They allow for characteristics that are inconsis-

tent with beliefs about the global category, guarding the perceiver from having to integrate new, disconfirming information into an existing stereotype (Heastone, Johnston, and Aird 1992). Several subtypes describe variations on the theme of the broad, elderly category.

Subtypes of Elderly People
Multiple subtypes of older adults have emerged in research on ageism (Brewer, Dull, and Lui 1981; Hummert 1990, 1997; Hummert et al. 1998; Schmidt and Boland 1986). In early work on elderly subtypes, participants sorted pictures and traits into categories as they thought appropriate and later assigned descriptive statements to photos of older people (Brewer et al. 1981). Three elderly subtypes emerged: the grandmotherly type, describec as helpful, kindly, serene, and trustworthy; the elder statesman, described as intelligent, competitive, aggressive, and intolerant; and the senior citizens, described as lonely, old-fashioned, weak, and worried.

Later research (Schmidt and Boland 1986) generated a dozen elderly subtypes, eight of which (perfect grandparent, liberal matriarch/patriarch, John Wayne conservative, reclusive, severely impaired, vulnerable, shrewd/cumuldeon, and despondent) were replicated by Hummert (1990). Even market researchers have identified multiple elderly subtypes: the adventures, the contented, the cautious, the gypsy, the restrained, and the survivor (Slater 1995).

Stereotype Content
The majority of research on stereotyping devotes itself to stereotyping processes, with ample reason (for a review, see Fiske 1998). Stereotyping processes respond to systematic principles and are stable over time, place, and out-group. Stereotype content, on the other hand, has been presumed to be volatile and random, morphing over time and unique to each social group. Thus, researchers have neglected content for its own sake. Recent research counters these assumptions, demonstrating that content may also prove systematic, in two fundamental respects: Across groups, stereotype contents share common dimensions, and where groups fall along these dimensions of stereotype content can be predicted from social structural variables (Fiske et al. 1999, 2001).

Two Dimensions of Stereotype Content
To many people, the term stereotype implies uniform antipathy toward a social group, a postulate that has been supported by many prominent social
psychologists (Allport 1954; Crosby, Bromley, and Saxe 1980; Sigall and Page 1971). Moreover, stereotypes have been considered unidimensional; groups are stereotyped along a single dimension reflecting general goodness (or badness). In recent work, we suggest that stereotypes are neither univalent nor one-dimensional. Instead, they contain both negative and positive beliefs, along multiple dimensions (Fiske et al. 1999, 2001). Stereotypes of out-groups frequently reflect ambivalence with groups often tagged as proficient in one sphere and inferior in the other. Some additional background on this theory will frame our subsequent placement of elderly people in this scheme.

The two core dimensions of general stereotype content that we propose, competence (e.g., independent, skillful, confident, able) and warmth (e.g., good-natured, trustworthy, sincere, friendly), have received copious support from several areas of psychology. These dimensions are rooted in classic person perception studies (Asch 1946; Rosenberg, Nelson, and Vivekanathan 1968) and have emerged in numerous in-depth analyses of specific social groups.

Similar factors have also appeared in more general stereotype content research. Peeters (1983, 1995) has argued for the dimensions of self-profitability (e.g., confident, ambitious, industrious, intelligent)—resembling our notion of competence—and other-profitability (e.g., conciliatory, tolerant, trustworthy, sensitive)—not unlike our concept of warmth. In the context of national stereotypes, Phalet and Poppe (1997) use a comparable distinction of competence and “morality”—honest, helpful, and tolerant—to interpret Eastern Europeans’ national stereotypes.

Akin to our concept of warmth and Peeters’s other-profitability, communal traits (helpful, aware of other’s feelings, able to devote self to others) concern interpersonal sensitivity, whereas agentic (or self-profitable) traits (independent, self-confident, and dominant) concern abilities in traditionally valued domains and are similar to our competence notion (Bakan, 1966). Likewise, Spence and Helmreich (1979) named two factors as accounting for most gender stereotypes, with instrumental (agentic) traits as stereotypically male and expressive (communal) traits as stereotypically female. In a related vein, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (e.g., Glick and Fiske 1996) delineates two types of prejudice against two types of women. Hostile sexism is directed at nontraditional women, perceived to possess agentic traits, and benevolent sexism is directed at traditional women, believed to possess communal traits.

Research on another specific social group, Asian Americans, has uncovered stereotypes comprising excessive competence (too ambitious, too hardworking) and deficient sociability (Hurh and Kim 1989; Lin and Fiske 1999; Kitano and Sue 1973). Alternatively, some stereotypes of disabled people fit the opposite cluster; blind people are perceived as socially sensitive (intuitive and friendly) but otherwise incompetent (helpless, dependent, incapable) (McGroarty and Fiske 1997).

Along these two dimensions, three clusters of stereotyped out-groups emerge: (1) warm and incompetent, (2) competent and cold, and (3) incompetent and cold. What is missing is the merger of warm and competent—because people reserve that description for in-groups. Each one of these constellations of stereotypes reflects a unique prejudice. Groups perceived as warm and incompetent, such as traditional women, will be the targets of paternalistic prejudice (liked but disrespected), while competent and cold groups such as Asians, are the targets of envious prejudice (disliked but respected). Groups stereotyped as cold and incompetent receive contemptuous prejudice (disliked and disrespected). Only groups perceived as warm and competent will evoke pride (liked and respected).

In short, the stereotype content model makes three proposals that have been relevant in this section (Fiske et al. 1999, 2001). (1) The two pivotal dimensions of stereotype content are warmth and competence, (2) people perceive most out-groups as significantly higher on one dimension (with in-groups high on both), and (3) distinct prejudices accompany each category of stereotype content (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick, forthcoming).

Survey data collected by Fiske and colleagues illustrates how stereotypes of social groups array along these two dimensions (figure 1.1) and provide support for the hypotheses. Across multiple survey studies (Fiske et al. 1999, 2001) participants rated systematically derived rosters of American social groups on warmth and competence, and status and competition. A small minority of groups (homeless people, poor people, and welfare recipients) were stereotyped as both incompetent and cold, presumably because people blame them for their lot in life. Only in-groups (in white, female, middle-class samples) were perceived to be both warm and competent (whites, Christians, women, and the middle class).

Consistently, however, participants rated the majority of groups as significantly higher on one dimension than on the other. That is, most out-groups were viewed as either competent and cold (Asians, Jews, and rich people), or incompetent and warm (disabled and retarded). Elderly people fell into the incompetent-warm category. Moreover, a distinct type of prejudice accompanied each quadrant of stereotype content: envy
In an examination of gender and age stereotypes, Kite, Deaux, and Miele (1991) similarly found that older people were believed less likely to possess agentic characteristics, whereas ratings of communal characteristics were unaffected by aging. Erber (1989; Erber, Ethere, and Szuchman 1992; Erber, Suchman, and Ethere, 1993) revealed an age-based double standard concerning attributions of memory failure, such that when young people forget, it is attributed to lack of effort or attention, but when older people do the same, it is attributed to incompetence. In other studies, older people were rated as intellectually incompetent (Rubin and Brown 1975) and less ambitious and responsible than younger people but also as friendlier and warmer than younger people (Andreoliti, Maurice and Whalen 2001). Furthermore, research on automatic stereotyping shows that people are quicker at associating elderly names with incompetence traits than with competence traits (Zemore and Cuddy, 2000).

A similar pattern of stereotype content appears in research on people’s beliefs about development throughout adulthood (Heckhausen, Dixon, and Baltz 1989). Participants rated hundreds of traits on desirability and estimated their average ages of onset (when people first develop these traits) and closing (when people lose these traits). Desirability ratings were negatively correlated with both onset and closing ages, indicating that traits believed common to younger populations are more desirable. Consistent with our hypothesis, additional analyses reveal that traits most similar to those on our warmth scale (affectionate, friendly, good-natured, kind, and trustworthy) were not predicted to close until as late as age 81.3. This average estimate is nine years later (a significant difference) than the mean predicted closing date (72.3) of competence traits (independent, industrious, intelligent, productive, self-confident, and smart). Older adults become incompetent first, according to stereotypes of life span development.

Researchers in industrial-organizational psychology and in business and management programs have produced abundant research on stereotyping and aging (Britton and Thomas 1973; Haefner 1977; Kirchner and Dunnette 1954; Locke-Connor and Walsh 1980; Rosen and Jerdee 1976a, 1976b; Singer 1986; Waldman and Avolio 1986). While there is a main effect of age, such that younger employees and applicants are generally rated more positively than older employees and applicants, a closer look reveals findings consistent with our view of a global elderly stereotype reflecting warmth and incompetence. In the workplace, older people are perceived as less competent in job performance–related tasks than in interpersonal ones (Avolio and Barrett 1987; Rosen and Jerdee 1976a, 1976b; Singer 1986). Incidentally, researchers have failed to demonstrate

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 1.1**

American social groups arrayed along perceived competence and perceived warmth and sorted by cluster analysis.

(highest for the competent-cold cluster), admiration (highest for the competent-warm cluster), pity (highest for the incompetent-warm cluster), and contempt (highest for the incompetent-cold cluster).

**Content of Elderly Stereotypes**

Strong evidence independently suggests that the global category elderly people falls squarely into the warm and incompetent cluster of stereotyped groups (Fiske et al. 1999, 2001; Heckhausen, Dixon, and Baltz 1989; Kite et al. 1991). In the Fiske et al. (1999, 2001) survey studies, elderly people reliably fell into the warm-incompetent cluster, alongside disabled and retarded people (figure 1.1). Elderly people were rated as less competent than eighteen of twenty-four groups and warmer than twenty-two of twenty-four groups (see figure 1.1). Competence ratings averaged only 2.63 out of 5.00 (below the scale midpoint), and warmth ratings averaged 3.78 (well above the scale midpoint). The two scores differed significantly from each other in all samples. These clusters were accompanied by distinct prejudices. When asked about the warm-incompetent cluster that included elderly people, participants most endorsed items reflecting paternalistic prejudice (pity and sympathy) and least endorsed emotions reflecting envy (envy and jealousy).
any actual relationship between age and job performance (for a review, see Saltzhouse and Maurer 1996). Older people’s alleged incompetence lies solely in the eye of the beholder.

Social Structure Predicts Stereotype Content in General
The stereotype content model makes another prediction, concerning the origins of competence and warmth stereotypes. Why do people choose these two dimensions as benchmarks for stereotyping? Structural relationships among different social groups foretell the content of the stereotypes of those groups. Specifically, the stereotype content model predicts that perceived relative status predicts which groups will be stereotyped as competent, whereas perceived lack of competition predicts who is seen as warm. Glick and Fiske (1999) contend that these social structural variables inform us about whether members of another group will be helpers or competitors.

In the Fiske et al. (1999, 2001) survey data, correlations between status and competence ratings (positive) and competition and warmth ratings (negative) were significant, in line with the hypothesis that social structural variables predict stereotype content. High-status groups, as rated by participants, were viewed as highly competent, and highly competitive groups were perceived as cold.

Social Structure Predicts Stereotype Content of Elderly People
As expected, in the Fiske et al. (1999, 2001) survey data, elderly people were perceived as low status and relatively noncompetitive. Their status scores across samples averaged 2.64 (on a 5-point scale), lower than eighteen of twenty-four groups. Similarly, competition scores averaged 2.59, lower than fifteen of twenty-four groups. Both ratings fall below the respective scale midpoints.

Because the competence and status scales in our survey research are general, to accommodate beliefs about a wide range of social groups, we can only speculate about what elderly-specific beliefs are being activated. We suggest that perceived group status is a strong predictor of perceived competence. Changes in social status accompany the life cycle, such that young and old people rank lowest and middle-aged people highest (Stokes 1992).

Modernization theory explains the reduced status of older people as a function of the transformation from traditional, agrarian societies to modern, industrial societies (for a review, see Branco and Williamson 1982). Four shifts in social structure are indicted. First, improved health care has inevitably extended the span of life, thereby increasing the size of the older population. As a result, retirement has become institutionalized, and elderly people no longer hold prestigious jobs or possess as much financial muscle as they once did. Second, technological advances created new jobs, for which older people were not trained. Job experiences were eclipsed by cutting-edge skills, which also contributed to putting older people out of work. Third, urbanization pulled young people away from their homes, triggering the collapse of close ties among extended family members. As a result, we no longer seek out our grandparents and great-grandparents for wisdom and guidance. Fourth, the implementation of public education has created a literate majority, effectively eliminating the elders’ long-held position as transmitter of cultural knowledge and wisdom. In short, older people have suffered the loss of status as a result of displacement from the workforce, loss of income, transience of extended family members, and the obsolescence of the spoken word.

Linked to changes in the relative social status of older people is their absence from competitive social roles, which leads to their stereotype as harmless and socially sensitive. In 1990, less than 3 percent of the workforce was over age 65 (Smolak 1993). Based on our concept of competition, which measures the degree to which a group is a perceived threat to resources, it is understandable that older adults are perceived as non-competitive.

Subtypes of Elderly People, Revisited
In line with our view that stereotypes fall along the dimensions of warmth and competence, we believe that each of the primary elderly subtypes (Brewer, Dull, and Lui 1981) clearly falls into one of the quadrants. The grandmother most closely mirrors the global elderly stereotype as nurturing but ineffectual, reflected in feelings of pity. She is high on communal qualities, but absent from her description are competence-related traits, such as independence, intelligence, and confidence.

The senior citizen lacks both competence and warmth. Presumably, people view this subtype as complaining and lazy, responsible for their predicament. Anger and resentment target people whose negative outcomes are believed to be individually controllable (Weiner 1985).

The elder statesman is agentic but socially insensitive (e.g., aggressive and intolerant), reflecting feelings of respect and mirroring the competent but not warm category. This subtype raises an issue worthy of note. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is among the most
powerful lobbying forces in Washington. What is remarkable is that this fact, which is clearly stereotype incongruent, has not penetrated the global stereotype of older people. Instead, it has apparently contributed to the development of the elder statesman subtype, reflecting characteristics not normally associated with older Americans.

Functions of Stereotyping

Interpersonal Level: The Social Cognitive Perspective

People have limited cognitive resources but must function in a complex social environment. To be successful, we employ cognitive short-cuts and commit countless approximations. Sometimes we are cognitive misers, using our mental resources frugally (Fiske and Taylor 1984), yet we are also motivated tacticians who think harder when it is useful to do so (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Distinguishing each person as unique (individuating) requires ample time and effort, draining us of our mental assets. When we do individuate, we must attend to and process complex information. Categorization, on the other hand, is simple and relatively effortless. Based on certain salient features, such as race, sex, or age, we assign individuals to categories. Those category assignments provide stereotypic information, which we use to infer further information about the individual in question.

Stereotyping serves two primary functions in interindividual situations. First, it allows us to make judgments (for better or for worse) when effortful processing is difficult (Bodenhausen 1990; Bodenhausen and Lichtenstein 1987; Kruglanski and Freund 1983; Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen 1994). When participants are asked to form impressions about people while completing a complex cognitive task, they recall more information about the individual when stereotypic labels are provided (Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen 1994). Our mental representations of out-groups are also simpler and more extreme than representations of in-groups, thereby facilitating the processing of information about unfamiliar groups. When college students were asked to describe a group of older adults, they assigned to them simpler and more extreme descriptions than their in-group descriptions of young people (Linville 1982).

Second, stereotyping provides us with information that guides our interactions with others. These category inferences often lead us to behave in ways that confirm the stereotypes, a process known as behavioral confirmation or self-fulfilling prophecy (for a review, see Darley and Fazio 1980).

Countless elderly people will attest to their treatment as incompetent, undermining their ability to function effectively.

Nonconscious activation of the elderly stereotype has specifically been shown to affect people’s social behavior. Subjects who were subliminally primed with elderly faces during computer tasks later walked significantly more slowly upon departing the lab than did those who did not receive the prime (Bangh, Chen, and Burrows 1996). This suggests that people use stereotypic information to direct their own behaviors in social interactions. People’s social behaviors may reflect their stereotypic expectations of the behaviors of their interaction partners. They adapt their behavior to facilitate smoother social exchanges.

People are not always tight-fisted with their cognitive capital. Short-cuts may be the default, but people are not fools. Fiske and Taylor (1991) suggest that people are motivated tacticians, strategically choosing situations that warrant additional mental resources when they are motivated and able to do so. For example, the continuum model (Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Fiske, Lin, and Neuberg 1999) proposes two poles of impression formation: category-based processing and attribute-based, or individuating, processing. Category-based processing relies on a top-down route; perceivers place a person in a category, from which they infer stereotypic information about the individual. Attribute-based processing is a bottom-up approach, wherein people actually attend to details about the individual, forming an impression based on fine points. What determines when perceivers will use attribute-based versus category-based processing is the accessibility of stereotype-incongruent information, along with the ability and motivation to deal with it. When stereotype-inconsistent information is offered, when cognitive resources are not taxed, and when people are motivated to be accurate, they are more likely to modify their stereotypes by integrating the new information into the overall impression (Fiske et al. 1987; Macrae, Hewstone, and Griffiths 1993).

Researchers in the past decade have begun to shift from an exclusive focus on cognition to a joint focus on cognition and motivation. Five core social motives—belonging, understanding, controlling, enhancing, and trusting—can help explain stereotyping-relevant goals (Fiske 2000). Belonging, the primary social goal, concerns people’s need for affiliation with others. To foster in-group relationships, people attend to individuating information about in-group members, echo the beliefs of in-group members, comply with in-group norms, and mimic in-group behavior. These all affect the degree to which people will or will not stereotype elderly
people, who may be treated as in-group members (family) or out-group members (elderly people).

People are also motivated to maintain a shared social understanding and control of socially effective interactions, both of which are relatively cognitive motives. The goal to understand others starts with automatic categorization and leads people to search for and remember stereotypic information. Social representations of elderly people constitute a shared cultural understanding. The motivation to control can cause people to treat stereotyped groups, including older people, in particularly preemptory ways, to maintain power hierarchies with older people toward the bottom.

Finally, people strive to enhance the self and trust in-group members, both of which are more affective goals. The former, self-enhancement, fits the suggestion by Snyder and Meine (1994) that stereotyping, specifically of elderly people, may also serve an ego-protective function. That is, inasmuch as older people threaten younger people by reminding them of the transience of youth, young people will be motivated to protect themselves against this threat. By attributing the perceived mental and physical deficiencies of older adults to some personal weakness, rather than blaming the aging process for these perceived losses, young people protect themselves from the truth of the inevitability of aging, enhancing self in the process.

Trust relates to maintaining in-group boundaries. Given that interdependence is essential to in-group functioning, it is adaptive for people to trust in-group members; thus, older people can be excluded. When people are interdependent with out-group members, however, they will be motivated to trust them. Successful intergroup cooperation builds trust, undercutting stereotyping toward out-group members. Interdependence across age groups can therefore undercut mutual stereotypes (for a review of the five core social goals, see Fiske 2000).

**Intergroup Level: Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories**

A complementary approach to interpersonal cognitive analyses of stereotyping comes from social identity and self-categorization theories, which focus on intergroup explanations. Social identity theory (SIT) views the divisions of groups into “us” (in-groups) and “them” (out-groups) as having both cognitive (categorization) and motivational (positive social identity) benefits (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986; Turner and Oakes 1989). Motivated to obtain positive social identities from the groups to which we belong, we distinguish in-groups from out-groups, which leads to a self-beneficial contrast. If an in-group advantage is not obvious, we create positive distinctiveness by favoring the in-group over the out-group on pertinent dimensions. By relying on stereotypes that exaggerate intergroup differences, we assign positive evaluations to our own group, relative to our evaluations of the out-group (for a review, see Brewer and Brown 1998). Elderly people demonstrate an in-group evaluative bias, rating characteristics associated with older people more favorably than characteristics associated with younger adults (Brubaker and Powers 1976; Fitzgerald 1978; Porter and O’Connor 1978; Rothbaum 1983; and Traxler 1971).

Self-categorization theory (SCT) extends SIT by dropping the motivational aspects of SIT and by explaining that the self can be conceived on many levels of categorization, which is contextually determined by how one relates to others, including in-group members (Turner and Oakes 1989; Oakes, Haslam, and Turner 1994). Viewed through the lens of SIT and SCT, young in-groups will favor themselves, to the exclusion of older out-groups. Although the reverse also occurs, the nonelderly are more likely to control significant resources, so their in-group favoritism has more severe consequences.

**Conclusion**

Amid the clamor of the 2000 presidential election vote-counting debacle, we were struck by media portrayals of older Palm Beach County voters who inadvertently voted for the wrong candidate as incompetent and harebrained. “If there’s a county in the world that would struggle with the ballot, it would be that one,” said one political science professor, citing demographics (i.e., age) as the culprit (Gordon 2000, para 3). Another interviewee added that elderly voters are “not as sharp as they used to be” (Gordon 2000, para 11). The nightly news even showed one Florida demonstrator carrying a sign that read, “Stupid people shouldn’t vote.”

We propose that today in the United States, elderly people are stereotyped as incompetent but also as warm. People view them ambivalently as physically and cognitively inept but socially sensitive. Preliminary data suggest that elderly people are subject to a paternalistic breed of prejudice; they are pitied but not respected. Because of historical and cultural changes, today’s elders are seen as low status, which elicits perceptions of incompetence, and passivity, leading to perceptions of warmth. Transformations in the content of elderly stereotypes stem from social structural
changes, resulting from historical and cultural transformations. In particular, they result from the diminished social status of older adults and the absence of older adults from competitive social roles.

From workplaces to medical settings, stereotyping of elderly people manifests itself through discriminatory communication and treatment (Zebrowitz and Montepare 2000). Believing older people are incompetent leads others to treat them as if they are incompetent. Young people use baby talk—higher voices and simpler words—and sound more unpleasant when communicating with older people (Hummert et al. 1998; Montepare, Steinberg, and Rosenberg 1992; Thimm, Rademacher, and Kruse 1998). People are less willing to engage in challenging conversations with elderly people by asking them difficult questions (Rodin and Langer 1980).

Our stereotypes of elderly ineptitude also come to life in the workplace. When evaluating supposed job interviews, people rated younger interviewees more positively overall, even when they had the same qualifications as the older interviewees (Avolio and Barrett 1987). Older job applicants are less likely to be hired, are viewed as more difficult to train, harder to place into jobs, more resistant to change, less suitable for promotion, and expected to have lower job performances (for a review, see Avolio and Barrett 1987).

Older people are victims of discrimination in medical settings as well. Sometimes we deny older people services afforded to younger people. For instance, when reporting the same symptoms as young people, older people are less likely to be referred for psychiatric assessments (Grant 1996; Hillerbrand and Shaw 1990). When reporting psychiatric symptoms commonly associated with aging, older patients are treated less thoroughly than young people reporting the same symptoms (Butler 1975). Medical doctors condescend to and patronize older patients by providing oversimplified information and presenting it in less engaging ways (Greene et al. 1989; Caporael and Culbertson 1986).

By keeping older people at a social distance, we deny ourselves exposure to stereotype-incongruent information, which could force us to see older people as a more variable group. Under certain conditions, inter-age contact (CaspI 1984; Schwartz and Simmons in press) and the presentation of stereotype-inconsistent information (Jackson and Sullivan 1988) curtail discrimination against elderly people. When presented with individualizing information, young adults are less likely to make age-stereotype-consistent attributions (Erber, Etheart, and Szuchman 1992) and, in some cases, even likely to assign more positive ratings to older people than to younger counterparts (Erber, Szuchman, and Etheart 1993).

Attributing the errors of older Palm Beach voters to intellectual incompetence perpetuates the worst of our cultural stereotypes. Stereotyping of elderly people goes largely unchallenged and even unnoticed in the United States. Nevertheless, intergroup contact among age groups and interdependence among young, middle-aged, and old people may restore a sense of respect, as well as liking for, all age groups in their glorious human variety.

Notes

1. It is important to distinguish subtypes from subgroups. The former results from the clustering of group members who disconfirm the stereotype, and the latter is the product of the linking together of group members based on their similarities (Jones 1997). The crucial difference is that subtypes leave the stereotype unchanged, whereas subgroups lead perceivers to appreciate within-group variability. When we discuss subordinate categories in this chapter, we are referring to subtypes, not subgroups.

2. It may be unclear from figure 1.1 that 21 of 24 of these groups differed significantly on competence and warmth, including 4 of 7 groups in the middle cluster.

References

We thank Kathleen and William Dexter, for sharing their experiences and insights on this topic and Matt Cuddy and Kenworthy Bilz for valuable feedback on drafts of this chapter.


