

## PERCEPTION OF THE OLD BY YOUNG ADULTS IN NIGERIA

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Using 21 bipolar adjectives, we aimed to identify the positive and negative perceptions of old people held by 375 young adults studying at a Nigerian university. Results showed that the young adults evaluated the concept of “old person” more positively than they did the concept of “young person”; specifically, the old person was rated as significantly more sincere, wise, fair, innocent, and predictable than the young person was. Further, we did not find any pervasive negative stereotypes of the old, as held by the young adults.

*Keywords:* young adults, perception of elderly people, old age, Nigeria, stereotype.

Whereas in many of the earlier studies conducted in Western societies it was suggested that the old are negatively viewed by the nonold (Barron, 1953; Rosow, 1962; Tuckman & Lorge, 1953), researchers who have studied Nigerian participants have observed that Nigerians view the elderly more positively (Pela, 1983) and, further, that if stereotyping of the old exists, it is not always in a negative direction (Togonu-Bickersteth, 1987). Further, attitudes toward the old in Nigeria comprise positive and negative attributions and the nature of contact with the old is an important determinant of the specific aspects of old age that are feared and, therefore, perceived negatively by the nonold (Togonu-Bickersteth, 1985).

Our purpose in conducting this study was to examine, through the use of semantic differential assessment, how young people rate the concept of an

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old person on some selected dimensions, and to examine if such ratings are significantly different from those for the young person concept. This will enable us to determine the proximate areas from which young people's positive and negative perceptions of the old are derived.

## Method

### Sample

Participants ( $N = 375$  youths; 202 males) were selected randomly from a state-owned university in Nigeria. Close to 75% were aged 20–25 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.2$  for males and 20.7 for females). All students had at least one living parent, and 70% had living grandparents and 30% had other older relations with whom they had regular contact. The average age of participants' mothers and fathers was 47.1 and 55.8 years, respectively.

### Data Collection

The research instrument was a structured, self-administered survey used to elicit relevant sociodemographic information and containing semantic differential scales to measure the connotative meanings of the concepts of *old person* and *young person*. For each concept, 21 bipolar adjectives with seven response options were provided; on the scale from 1 to 7, the latter represented the most favorable connotation. We calculated mean scores for each pair of adjectives and for the three major factors of evaluation, potency, and activity (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957).

## Results

The results of participants' ratings on the semantic differential scales are presented in Table 1. Overall, they rated the concept of the old person more positively than they did the young person, but evaluated the young person as more active and potent than they did the old person. Specifically, individuals rated the old person as being significantly more sincere, wise, fair, innocent, and predictable, whereas the young person was rated as happier and cleaner. There was no significant differentiation in the perception of the young and old person concepts regarding pleasantness, strangeness, or intelligence. As regards the potency factors, the young person concept was viewed favorably on three of the four dimensions. That is, the young person was rated as being healthier, stronger, and more rugged, and the old person was rated as more lenient. In terms of perceived activity, the young person was rated as being more active, faster, and warmer, but the old person was rated as being more relaxed. Our analysis revealed no significant sex or age differences in ratings of the old or young.

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and t-Test Results for the Items

Items	Old		Young		t	
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Evaluation</i>						
1.	Pleasant/Unpleasant	5.3	2.5	5.1	2.5	1.09
2.	Clean/Dirty	4.4	2.6	5.8	2.1	8.09
3.	Innocent/Guilty	5.7	2.1	3.8	2.7	10.75*
4.	Normal/Strange	4.6	2.7	4.9	2.6	1.55
5.	Sincere/Insincere	6.3	1.7	3.7	2.7	15.78*
6.	Wise/Foolish	6.4	1.6	4.6	2.7	11.79*
7.	Valuable/Worthless	6.4	1.6	5.9	2.1	3.67
8.	Safe/Dangerous	5.6	2.3	3.2	2.6	13.42
9.	Happy/Sad	5.6	2.2	6.0	1.9	2.67
10.	Rich/Poor	3.2	2.5	4.8	2.5	8.77
11.	Fair/Unfair	6.0	1.8	4.5	2.6	9.19*
12.	Intelligent/Ignorant	5.3	2.4	5.2	2.5	0.55
13.	Predictable/Unpredictable	3.8	2.8	2.9	2.5	4.45*
<i>Potency</i>						
14.	Lenient/Strict	5.0	2.5	3.3	2.6	9.13*
15.	Healthy/Sick	3.3	2.6	6.0	1.9	15.83*
16.	Strong/Weak	2.5	2.3	6.1	1.9	23.15*
17.	Rugged/Delicate	2.9	2.5	3.7	2.7	4.22
<i>Activity</i>						
18.	Relaxed/Tense	5.1	2.5	3.1	2.6	10.75*
19.	Passive/Active	2.8	2.5	6.2	1.7	21.77*
20.	Fast/Slow	1.9	1.9	6.3	1.7	33.33*
21.	Warm/Cold	3.7	2.6	5.7	2.1	11.63*
Mean evaluation		5.3	1.1	4.6	1.4	7.7*
Mean potency		3.4	1.5	4.8	1.4	13.2*
Mean activity		3.3	1.4	5.3	1.3	19.6*

Note. N = 375. \*p < .005.

## Discussion

The results confirm our earlier observation that attitudes of the young toward the old entail a mixture of negative and positive attributions. The fact that our sample of young persons evaluated the concept of an old person more positively than they evaluated the concept of a young person indicates the absence of pervasive negative stereotyping of the old.

A closer look at the dimensions on which positive evaluations of the old are based suggests that these are the same areas in which the larger Yoruba society believe the aged outshine younger age groups. The observed evaluations of the elderly person as being wiser, fairer, and more sincere is in keeping with the prevailing belief that old age confers wisdom and gives individual freedom to be more sincere and, therefore, fairer in their dealings with issues or persons. This is why Yoruba young persons typically defer to an older person, particularly in matters pertaining to arbitration and dispute settlement.

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On the basis of our findings, there is no pervasive negative stereotyping of the old by the young. Further, the old are positively evaluated by the young in those areas of life where the aged are traditionally believed to possess skills that are essential for group solidarity.

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