

The Perils of Ageism

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Ageism is still rampant in America, and many old people themselves trade in unflattering stereotypes of the elderly, including helplessness and incompetence. Such caricatures are not only false and cruel, they are also unhealthy. Research has shown that old people who believe in negative age stereotypes tend to fulfill them.

And it may not just be the elderly who are harmed by ageism. A new study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that young, healthy people who stereotype old people may themselves be at risk of heart disease many years down the road. Researchers Becca Levy and Martin D. Slade of the Yale School of Public Health, along with Alan B. Zonderman and Luigi Ferrucci from the National Institute on Aging Intramural Research Program, examined data on hundreds of men and women who have been studied for almost four decades as part of the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging. Back in 1968, when scientists began studying these volunteers, they ranged in age from 18 to 49 and were all in good health. At that time, scientists gathered all sorts of information about the volunteers, including their attitudes toward the elderly. Their images of being old covered the gamut from very positive to very negative.

The researchers examined the health histories of all the volunteers, focusing on cardiovascular disease, and they discovered that there was a striking link between ageism early in life and poor heart health later on. That is, those who viewed old age in negative terms were much more likely to experience some kind of cardiovascular disorder over the next four decades. The scientists also looked at a subset of volunteers who didn't have any heart problems until after they were 60—at least 21 years later—and found that these people were likely to have been negative about aging from early on. The episodes of heart disease could not be explained by smoking, depression, cholesterol, family history, or any of a myriad other possible risk factors.

What this suggests, the authors write, is that people are internalizing stereotypes of old age when they are still quite young—with far reaching consequences. This is the first scientific look at people maturing into the very people they have been unkindly caricaturing. It could be taken as a cautionary tale for those who think they'll never grow old.