Stereotype Threat and the Senior Library Patron

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Vicki went back to the librarians' office shaking her head. "I try to be nice," she said to no one in particular, "but I just have a hard time with these older patrons. If it's not the technology, it's me having to explain things two and three times or write everything down. They don't remember anything. I don't want to sound mean, but they're a lot of work!"

At the same time, Mrs. Wilson, Vicki's elder patron, was headed toward the bus stop. She didn't really understand everything the librarian said – all those health web sites! She tried to write down the internet addresses, but the librarian seemed to be in a hurry to finish helping her so she didn't get them all. She also meant to ask about using her new mobile reader to borrow e-books from the library, but was afraid of further aggravating the librarian. Mrs. Wilson wasn't happy. Why did she feel so bad about asking a few questions?

Stereotype threat and the elderly. In this article, I examine stereotype threat and the elderly as library patrons. Stereotype threat occurs when a person believes they risk confirming negative stereotypes about their group.[1] "They know at some level, that they are in a predicament: Their performance could confirm a bad view of their group and of themselves, as members of that group."[2] Stereotype threat is situational— is the individual in a situation that presents a risk of confirming the stereotype?

For example, like all students, black doctoral students have questions for librarians, but unlike Caucasian students, a black student may feel that if he asks a question, the librarian will judge him to be unqualified to pursue a doctorate or even to be in the university.[3] It can include a belief that Caucasian librarians cannot or will not be helpful because they do not find black students' research, which often focuses on minority concerns, to be of value. Stereotype threat may be evident in other groups as well, such as in women who believe that if they have difficulty doing math, they will be judged stereotypically as 'women who can't do math.'[4] For the elderly, a request to write something down or repeat an explanation may make them think that their behavior confirms stereotypes of seniors as having poor memories or cognitive ability.

Stereotype threat can also be a continual source of stress. The person feeling the threat doesn't see the ways in which he or she is the same as other people in similar situations – for example, all doctoral students, regardless of race, have questions. Many of them struggle with finding meaning and value in their research and worry about what others think of their abilities. But instead of seeing this similarity, persons subject to stereotype threat focus on whether their behavior will justify beliefs that there is something wrong with them and that they do not compare favorably with other people – that they will confirm stereotypes in the mind of others. Stereotypes are a continual threat to the elderly because our society has such ingrained negative beliefs about older people, that we rarely notice them in our language and behavior. This ageism or "systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender"[5] influences us all, such as using the term 'senior moment' at work to express forgetfulness. The term indicates that not only are people biased against older people – assuming that they are forgetful - but they do not fear sanctions for expressing that bias in the workplace. Acceptable terms such as this feed into stereotypes about the elderly, and by extension, affect how people interact with them. According to Butler, ageism is "manifested in a wide range of phenomena, on both individual and institutional levels—stereotypes and myths, outright disdain and dislike, simple subtle avoidance of contact, and discriminatory practices in housing, employment, and services of all kinds"[6]

Because of its pervasiveness in American culture, it is difficult to escape ageism in America. Movies and television tend to feature young people, with seniors who live active and meaningful lives being infrequently visible. Movies such as 'The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel,' are considered unique for featuring seniors living their lives and 'still' being interested in love and relationships. Advertising, unless it is for certain medications or hearing aids, also uses younger actors and when senior actors are used, they are looked at as a source of humor or worthy of derision. In one commercial, an older woman with photos spread across her wall in a thinly veiled reference to a Facebook 'wall,' was told by a similarly-aged friend, "That's not how this works. That's not how any of this works." It's doubtful you'd see the same commercial with younger people. And, as a YouTube commenter remarked, if you substituted minorities for the older women, the commercial would not have aired more than once. When the commenter asked if others failed to see how disrespectful the commercial was to older people, they responded by saying that perhaps s/he was too 'sensitive' and should get a sense of humor. I agree with the commenter - substitute minorities for the older women and people would demand

that it be pulled from the airwaves. But protests for making fun of the elderly are unlikely to happen.

Research indicates that bias against the elderly starts at an early age. Even very young children were found to have negative perceptions of the elderly and it doesn't seem to get better as we ourselves age. People associate 'bad' with 'aging,' and negative perceptions about age are stronger than those about race.[7]

Simply believing that they are in the presence of negative stereotypes can affect the elderly. "In fact, it has been shown that dependency may stem more heavily from the social interactions with others than from biological deficits per se." That is, if staff expect the elderly to have difficulty understanding new or complicated concepts, or to have poor memories, the elderly will tend to change their behavior in order to confirm the stereotype.[8] In one study, young and old adults were given fictitious readings about memory across the lifespan. When the readings were positive, both age groups performed similarly in memory tests afterward. When the readings were negative about memory and the elderly, the younger people had a higher recall rate than did the older readers, who had scored well previously, but whose performance on the tests now declined.[9] Negative biases expressed by others, negative portrayals in the media, and negative self-image because of the changes that occur with aging, can combine to make the older person perform at the suboptimal levels expected by the non-elderly. The behavior of the elderly conforms to the stereotype even in the absence of physical or cognitive reasons for it to do so and the continuation of biased behaviors directed toward the elderly causes more damage than we might expect.

New Reality of Aging. You and your staff will be dealing with increasing numbers of the elderly. As of 2014, approximately 15% of the population was 65 or over.[10] In 2015, there were an estimated 74.9 million Boomers.[11]   Many of them (such as myself) are still working as they inch toward retirement – and many of those workers will not retire anytime soon. By 2022, 27% of older men and 20% of older women will still be in the workplace.[12] For many reasons, from better health than previous generations,[13] to a need to feel useful, to the sad fact that 75% of Americans between 55 and 64 have less than $30,000 saved for retirement,[14] older Americans will be working longer.

Consider your own biases about aging when dealing with these 'young-old'[15] (Imagine my surprise to learn that I was one of the 'young-old.'). For example, what do you think of when

I say '68 year old woman'? Do you think of a vibrant pediatrician, still practicing and taking mission trips to South America with her church? What about 'old man'? Do you picture someone with a popular YouTube channel focusing on classic rock videos? Or do you think of a person who is barely functioning and certainly not a fan of the Stones? By the way, Mick Jagger, at 73 is 'middle-old.'

Interestingly, while some older people internalize negative stereotypes, others will maintain positive perceptions of themselves by deciding that the stereotypes apply to others, but not to themselves. Other elderly may be approaching senility, but they are not.[16] "The idea of the ability to grow and change long into later life is not supported by ideologies within a socioeconomic and political system that continue to reinforce the notion that 'old people' are static and ready to die. In this view, life belongs only to the young."[17] "The fact is that many seniors face the challenges of their life stage with dignity and grace while remaining involved in meaningful personal and professional ways. They are the seekers and doers despite stereotypes."[18] As seniors face life challenges, like younger people, they may also be 'finding' themselves, and discovering what it means to be retired, or unable to retire and have to work the door at Walmart because that's the only job they can find at 70 years old, or getting used to people either ignoring them or treating them like a child (as my 85 year old mother likes to say when she has been treated this way, "I'm old; I'm not stupid."). On a positive note, it can be a time for taking the classes you slept through in college, working for the nonprofit that couldn't afford your salary before, or just enjoying doing what you want to do without the obligations of children and employers. Things change and some doors may close, but many other doors open – and some of those doors will lead older people to the library.

The older patron. Managers should consider including older patron issues in staff training. Presentations by social workers, physicians, and community leaders who work with senior populations can provide useful information for staff. And, while I have discussed the generally able senior in this article, there are seniors who need care and assistance. In your senior-related programing and training, do not forget about the information needs of family caregivers to the elderly.

Supporting the need for additional training is the research indicating that in the presence of stereotype threat, the elderly may develop behaviors that feed into the stereotype – behaviors that weren't there initially. Staff should avoid tones of voice, patronizing behaviors, and other interactions with the elderly that may create self-doubt and dependence in them. In addition to

helping staff modify their conversational and reference skills with this group, managers may also want to:

1. Create a quiet area where the librarian can be heard clearly by those with hearing difficulties and where patrons can speak at a normal level without feeling they are disturbing other patrons. These areas also may be useful for assisting patrons with disabilities or who aren't comfortable talking about private matters at the reference desk so creating such an area could be cost effective as it can be used by patrons with a variety of needs.

2. Provide a safe learning environment for seniors who want to know more about technology. In this setting, seniors should feel their questions are treated with respect and experience early successes with the technology – just like any other learner. Perhaps seniors with technical experience could volunteer to teach these classes. They may be more aware of the types of difficulties seniors have with technology, their learning styles, or the reasons seniors want to use a particular technology.

3. Ask seniors what they would like in terms of services and material format. Use open-ended questions and don't assume you know what's best for them. Would your patrons prefer large print books over electronic resources (or vice versa)? Many older seniors do not use e-book readers. Others prefer them because they can adjust the font size and they may be easier for arthritic hands to hold. Use a focus group – people may prefer to have a conversation rather than write responses on paper or fill out an online survey.

Stereotypes are powerful. History has shown us the power of negative stereotypes regarding Jews, black men, native peoples, and others. Most of us have made efforts to rid ourselves of stereotypes about these groups, but as a society, we continue to cling to biases about seniors. No one should hesitate to approach the reference desk or use library services for fear of validating stereotypes about the elderly.

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