2   *Stereotypes and Images*

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Stereotypes of Aging
   A. Stereotypes are generalized beliefs or opinions based on individual experience and often produced by irrational thinking.
   1. Stereotyping and labeling seem to fulfill our need to structure and organize situations to minimize ambiguity and clarify where we stand in relation to others.
      a. Because of the complexity of our society, we need to be able to make quick assessments of situations and people, and we usually based those judgments on our beliefs or previous experience.
      b. When observations become rigidly categorized, we have fallen into making assessments based on stereotypes.
   2. Stereotyping is usually inaccurate: when we generalize by putting people into categories, we oversimplify reality by ignoring inconsistent information and emphasizing only a few characteristics.
   3. Stereotypes are emotional impressions, not based on objective information, and they categorize people.
      a. Stereotypes can interfere with our judgment by arousing strong and sometimes negative emotions such as hatred or resentment.
      b. Hating or resenting any person or groups of people on the basis of a trait such as age is ignorant and unfair.
   B. Positive and Negative Stereotypes
   1. Tuckman and Lorge (1953) were among the first gerontologists to study stereotypes; they found old people were perceived to be set in their ways, unproductive, a burden to their children, stubborn, grouchy, lonely, "rocking-chair types," and in their second childhood.
   2. Psychologists have continued to find that society stereotypes older people.
      a. Palmore (1990) found the negative stereotypes of: illness, impotency, ugliness, mental decline, mental illness, uselessness, isolation, poverty, and depression (grouchiness, touchiness, crankiness).
      b. Palmore countered all these stereotypes with factual information that disproved them for the majority of older persons.
   3. Stereotypes are no longer as negative as they were in the 1950s.
      a. Studies show increasingly positive attitudes toward elders over the last several decades.
      b. This is due to shifting demographics, which have resulted in more exposure of the general population to older individuals and improved health of elders in the 1990s.
   4. Despite this positive shift in social attitude, there are two kinds of negative attitudes that remain relatively common:
      a. Ageism, that focuses only on the least capable, less healthy, and least alert aged.
         (1) This focus on the sick takes attention away from the healthy aged who defy negative stereotypes.
         (2) The biomedicalization of aging emerged over a century ago with the growth of scientific inquiry and advances in medical science.
            (a) It is the belief that the problems associated with aging are biological rather than social and behavioral.
            (b) The problems of aging, therefore, can only be addressed by medical technology.

        (c) A biomedicalized perspective of age locks the aging process and the individual into an irreversible decline of physical deterioration.

        (d) Trapping the aging individual in this stereotype limits all other possibilities for physical, psychological, and spiritual growth and development in later life.

  b. Compassionate stereotyping portrays elders as disadvantaged on some level (economic, social, or psychological), in need and deserving of help by others.

    (1) This stereotyping invokes pity.

        (a) The elderly do not want pity; they want the tools for being independent and self-reliant.

        (b) For some the tools for self-reliance are inherent qualities; for others, the inherent qualities are supplemented with external resources, such as a wheel chair, a hearing aid, or specially designed educational opportunities.

    (2) Compassion stereotypes perpetuate dependency and low self-esteem and unnecessarily lower expectations of what older people can achieve.

5. Hummer (1990) found the two most frequently cited positive stereotypes of older people were the "Golden Agers" (lively, adventurous, active, sociable, well traveled, etc.) and "Perfect Grandparents" (kind, loving, family oriented, generous, grateful, supportive, understanding, wise, knowledgeable, etc.).

6. Hummer found the most prevalent negative age stereotypes to be "Severely Impaired" (slow-thinking, incompetent, feeble, incoherent, inarticulate, senile) and "Despondent" (depressed, sad, hopeless, afraid, neglected, lonely).

  a. The despondent stereotype illustrates compassionate stereotyping.

  b. The severely impaired stereotype illustrates biomedicalization of aging.

7. Even though positive and negative typecastings of elders emerge from a kernel of truth (e.g., they do become more frail and depression in later life can be a serious problem), the tragedy of stereotyping is that the individual becomes objectified.

  a. Objectification is internalized by the person who is being victimized by it.

  b. A vicious circle of loss of sense of self ensues.

8. Mass media are an important source of stereotyping about aging in the U.S.

  a. Media shapes the attitudes of children and the self-concepts of adults.

  b. Older people continue to be invisible or negatively portrayed in the media.

    (1) When they are visible, it is seldom (less than 10 percent of the time) in major roles.

    (2) Old women are less likely to appear than old men, and when they are present they are portrayed negatively.

  c. Although the average age of Americans is increasing, most television characters are young.

    (1) Elders watch more television than all other age groups, averaging 21 hours a week, or three hours a day.

    (2) Many elders are dependent on television for companionship and entertainment; for them, it is a window to the world.

    (3) The more elders watch the negative images on television, the worse they feel about themselves.

    (4) Elders are significantly more likely to be consumers of evening news; yet, they are often left out.

    (5) If local television were to report more stories of interest to an older audience, viewers of all ages would have a better developed perspective of social issues affecting a broad age range and the fewer stereotypes would develop.

II. Who Is Old?
  A. No definition of old age has been agreed upon: "old age" means different things and is assigned on the basis of chronology, biology, and social standards.
    1. Sweeping statements about a category of people stereotype individuals within the category because they bypass existing individual differences.
      a. We do not become a different person because we have reached a chronological marker that makes us "old."
      b. Aging is a gradual process with many influences; people age differently.
    2. Over time new cohorts move into later life, bringing with them unique life experiences, values, and attitudes that have been shaped by shared sociohistorical events of their times.
      a. A classical study of life-course events shows notable differences in personality style between people who were young adolescents and those who were young adults beginning their families and careers at the time of the great stock market crash.
      b. Stereotypes of "cautious" and "conservative" might be quite descriptive of one age cohort among the current "old" and completely inaccurate for another cohort, also currently "old."
  B. In part, longevity is behind the need for more precise definitions of just who are the "old."
    1. Those who are relatively young, about 65 to 75, are referred to as the "young old."
    2. Older people who are vigorous, fit, and healthy have been labeled the "able elderly."
    3. Those 80 and older are variously called the "old old," "the frail elderly," or "the extreme aged," depending on their health and the focus of the gerontologist's work.
    4. The category of centenarian is used by the media and professions to address the growing numbers of people living past their hundredth year.
  C. Public Face of Aging has Changed
    1. Plastic surgery, botox, restalyn and other use has increased
      a. surgical procedures increased 115%
      b. non-surgical procedures increased 754%
  D. The Legal Definition of Old
    1. In the 1890s, Germany's Otto von Bismarck established a social security system for German elders that benefited citizens 65 years or older.
      a. Life expectancy in the late 1800s was 48 years for men and 51 years for women.
      b. The political advantage of addressing emerging Positivist social thought by establishing social security programs far outweighed any economic disadvantages.
    2. In 1935, the U.S. passed the Social Security Act under President Franking D. Roosevelt.
      a. In that act, 65 was named as the onset of old age, in accordance with the tradition established in Europe.
      b. In line with Social Security standards, most companies as well as state and local governments developed pension programs beginning at age 65 for retiring workers.

3. This legal definition has become a social definition: on retirement, a person's lifestyle generally changes dramatically, creating a point of entry from one phase of life to another that has become a social event for celebration and congratulations.
   a. Retirement is one of the few life-course transitions that is celebrated throughout the United States.
   b. "Retirement age" has become somewhat standardized legally, socially, and psychologically as initiation into "old age."
E. Since the 1930s, medical science has extended longevity and improved general health.
   1. The 65-year-old today is not the same physically or psychologically as the 65-year-old in 1935.
      a. Today's 65 year-old is likely to be healthier and better educated and to be more intimately connected with the larger world through the media or television and radio.
      b. Social Scientists now question whether 75, 80, or 85 might more accurately mark the beginning of old age.
F. Whatever the age, any chronological criterion for determining old age is too narrow and rigid, for it assumes everyone ages in the same ways and at the same time.

III. The Social Construction of Aging
A. Self-concept is the way in which a person sees himself or herself—how individuals define themselves to themselves, the ongoing image we have of ourselves.
   1. Even if we see ourselves changing, that change is emerging from something that is or was also part of the self-concept.
      a. Chronological age is an "empty variable"—it is the importance of the events that occur with the passage of time that have relevance for the study of identity development, not time itself.
      b. Self-concept dictates the way in which people interpret and make meaning of the events that occur in their lives; it shapes our styles of coping and managing the world in which we live.
   2. The social construction of self addresses the idea that the way we interpret events in our lives is partially a reflection of how we are treated and partially the extent to which we have internalized the way society has defined or categorized us.
   3. Those people who see themselves as old and accept as true the negative characteristics attributed to old age may, indeed, be old.
      a. As W. I. Thomas stated, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."
      b. Current research on self-concept emphasizes the knowledge base that helps individuals maintain a consistent sense of who they are throughout their life experiences.
         (1) Those who have a good sense of continuity of who they are appear to be better adjusted in later life.
         (2) They are less likely to identify themselves as being old, because they identify as being who they always have been.
   4. A current focus in gerontology is to move away from scientific measurements of personality and aging processes toward listening to the voices of aging people themselves—to their own narratives of their life processes.
      a. This methodology is referred to as phenomenology: the meaning of an event is defined by the person experiencing that event, not a researcher's hypothesis.
      b. Many older people see themselves not as old, but rather as ageless, as living in their old age.

      c. The ageless self is ongoing, continuous, and creative process (Kaufman 1994)

         (1) The ageless self draws meaning from the past, interpreting and recreating it as a resource for being in the present.

         (2) It also draws meaning from the structural and ideational aspects of the cultural context: social and educational background, family, work, values, ideals, and expectations.

         (3) Elders formulate the reformulate personal and cultural symbols of their past to create a meaningful coherent sense of self, thereby creating a viable present.

      d. Through narrative techniques, the concept of possible selves has emerged: a sense of who we were, who we are presently, and who we are becoming.

         (1) This projection of who we might become can be positive, hoped-for selves, or negative, feared selves.

         (2) Elders who experience a threat to their health can project a negative possible self.

         (3) Both positive and negative possible selves can motivate making useful and appropriate behavioral change.

B. Occupation and achievement: the age at which a person becomes old depends to some extent on the nature of his or her job.

   1. The classic work of Lehman (1953) found that in most fields the productivity of adults peaked when they were in their 30s; on in a few fields did it peak in the 40s or older.

   2. More recent studies show the 40s and beyond to be highly productive for a number of professions, including sales and marketing, and fields requiring special skills and knowledge.

      a. Farmer productivity, which requires physical endurance and historical knowledge of plants, soils, and weather patterns, peaks at midlife; the older family farmer moves to a role of mentor as the younger generation takes over.

      b. Novelists peak in their 50s and 60s; botanists and inventors, in their 60s; scholars, such as humanists, historians, and philosophers, in their 60s and 70s because old age is a time of reflection.

C. Coping with stress and illness

   1. People who are chronologically young can be "old before their time" if they exhibit the physical and mental traits characteristics of more advanced age.

   2. Studying the link between stress, illness, and physiological aging began with an attempt to estimate the amount of stress created in people by various life events.

      a. The Stressful Life Events Scale: a rating scale to measure stress over a year's time using 43 life events.

      b. Events are tabulated over a specific period of time and weighted by stress-load.

   3. Psychosocial and environmental stress ages people.

      a. Stress is a well-documented cause of anxiety, depression, migraine headaches, and peptic ulcers.

      b. Stress is a precursor of coronary heart disease and stroke.

   4. What stresses individuals changes with the cohort: the Stressful Life Events Scale was adjusted in 1977 and again in 1995 to reflect cultural changes in perceptions of stress.

      a. Modern-day raters saw marriage as a less meaningful event that did persons 18 and 30 years earlier.

      b. Death of a close family member was adjusted significantly upward in LCUs in the 1995 sample, compared with the 1965 and 1977 samples.

         (1) Longevity is an important part of this adjustment.

         (2) A greater proportion of adults have older parents and grandparents living—and dying—than did the 1965 sample.

     c. Economic and work-related events are more highly loaded among women in the 1990s than for women in the 1960s and 1970s.

     d. Many of the most stressful life events occur most frequently in one's later years, including death of a spouse, death of a close family member, death of a friend, change in health or behavior of a family members, and major personal injury or illness.

5. How does stress affect the individual?

     a. The individual's response to stress, including the perception of ill health, is the key.

         (1) Individuals who are highly stressed, who feel they have little control over their lives, and who have limited social support systems appear to be most vulnerable to disease.

         (2) If the individual lacks the resources to cope with the consequent stress, illness may result or the aging process may speed up.

     b. An individual's age may depend on the number of severely stressful events he or she experiences and on the individual's ability to cope with them.

         (1) Throughout life, adjustment requires adapting to change.

         (2) The ability to address stress by adapting to change—one's coping and adaptation resources—reflects how one will age.

D. Studies of children's attitudes

1. Research shows children tend to stereotype the elderly, but these stereotypes have become incrementally less overtly negative in the past 30 years.

2. Children formulate attitudes about elders and the aging process at an early age.

     a. Children as young as three exhibit ageist language.

     b. By age five they begin to have clear attitudes about aging and being old.

     c. In adolescence, children appear to stereotype and adopt values in a way similar to adults.

3. Children's attitudes are shaped by various outside forces: families, peers, school, and media.

     a. The media are a primary source of ageist messages for children.

         (1) Even fairy tales instill ageist feelings in the very young: evil, ugly old witches and mean old stepmothers endanger children in many stories.

         (2) Some books are changing this theme, emphasizing, for example, the grandparent-grandchild connection.

     b. A cross-national study found that children believe that the physical psychological, socioeconomic, and sexual powers of old people decline and that old people's skills become less useful with age.

     c. These attitudes reflect a negative stereotype based on a biological model of decline—a decline that children can observe by watching grandparents age and die.

     d. It is important that children be provided greater opportunities to develop positive interactions with older people, in part because their internalized attitudes about old age will have a significant influence on their own lives and the ways in which they see themselves as they age.

4. Changes in attitude

     a. The ways in which attitudes can be changed have been extensively examined in the past 40 years.

         (1) Three primary ways identified in 1982 by Class and Knott are through:

             (a) Discussions with peers

             (b) Direct experience with attitude objects

             (c) Increased information or knowledge

         (2) This model has been used in several projects for school-based programs to change children's attitudes toward the elderly.

(a) In a classroom experiment, older volunteers were paired with children to assist with a school-based task and included structured and informal discussions designed to foster more intimate relations in the pairs.

(b) Researchers found that as a result of the interactions children and youth developed more positive attitudes about the aged and about aging, and those attitudes remained part of the children's perceptual schema five years later.

    b. Teachers can improve children's attitudes toward old age by telling them about old people's physical and mental capabilities.

      (1) They can present accurate information about old age and can bring active, creative elders into the classroom.

      (2) They can help children explore attitudes toward older people as they explore cultural and ethnic differences among classmates' backgrounds, e.g., by discussing different ways parents and grandchildren interact with grandparents.

E. Studies of college students' attitudes

  1. Understanding how younger adults view older adults is important because those attitudes will impact intergenerational relationships, the level of concern for social programs that benefit older adults, and the self-concept of that younger adult as he or she matures into middle age and later life.

  2. Studies of college students' attitudes toward aging show very mixed results.

    a. Some of the lack of consistency is methodological.

      (1) Attitude is a multidimensional mental schema influenced by many factors, including exposure to older people, gender, culture, and individual differences of personality.

      (2) The elderly do not make up a single category: vast individual differences exist among elders.

    b. A second reason for mixed findings is that older adults may be seen to some extent as multidimensional people with both positive and negative attributes.

  3. The most generalized stereotype among college students is based on a biological model of decrement and excludes personality, skill, and interactional factors; this can be a particularly problematic perspective for students training for the health and healing professions.

  4. A 2005 study at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles found:

    a. 66 percent of college-aged students believed that most older people didn't have enough money to live on (compassionate stereotype).

    b. 61 percent believed that loneliness is a serious problem for older people, when in fact only 33 percent of people over 65 agree.

  5. A phenomenological study of stereotypes found that students paid the most attention to the changing physical appearance and capabilities of older people.

    a. Students' responses to the word aged included

      (1) A description of physical decline.

      (2) A social position or role description, such as "bad driver" or "grandparent."

      (3) Psychological qualities, such as "wise," "lonely," "experienced."

    b. The students had a relatively balanced mix of both positive and negative stereotypes.

    c. In response to the question, "What are your general thoughts or views about the aged?" students also displayed a range of attitudes from negative to neutral to positive.

IV. Explaining Stereotypes

A. Historical and Cultural Explanations

  1. Understanding the relationships between generations and exploring views about growing old in a previous era are the jobs of a historian.

2. Rude, insulting or negative labels directed to anyone whom we consider "other" is not new and seems to endure throughout history.
   a. The words we use to describe people provide a basis for the formation of stereotypes, and people often internalize those labels, incorporating them into their own self-concepts.
   b. Language shapes consciousness, and our consciousness affects our health and well-being as well as our interpersonal relationships.
3. Levy and Langer identified a dramatic relationship between cultural beliefs and the degree of memory loss people experience in old age.
   a. They conducted memory tests with old and young mainland Chinese, old and young from the American Deaf culture, and old and young hearing Americans.
      (1) They found younger subjects, regardless of culture, perform similarly on memory tests.
      (2) Older Chinese and older Deaf participants outperformed the older American hearing group.
      (3) The sample of old Chinese performed similarly to the sample of young Chinese, even though the older Chinese had completed fewer years of education than the young Chinese or the old and young Americans.
   b. The researchers believe that stereotypes about how old people cognitively age become self-fulfilling prophecies.
      (1) Of the three groups studied, the Chinese reported the most positive and active internal image of aging.
      (2) The internal self-concept, reflecting society's judgments, directly impacts memory processes.
4. Use of ageist language is not unique to the 20th century.
   a. Covey (1991) illustrated the extent to which a culture's religious and philosophical values play out in stereotypes in his history of the term "miser."
      (1) The miser, a social role defined as a mean or grasping person is associated with avarice, one of the seven deadly sins, and was thought for centuries to be the chief sin of old age.
      (2) Covey concludes that there are justifiable reasons why older people have been associated with miserly behavior:
         (a) The need to be frugal to ensure their future survival.
         (b) The reluctance of older parents to surrender family wealth to their demanding offspring.
         (c) Social support programs were not readily available and stigma was sometimes attached to those receiving benefits.
      (3) Depictions of older people dying surrounded by their worldly possessions also fueled the image of the miser.
         (a) Older people were expected to surrender their worldly concerns and possessions in order to enter heaven.
         (b) Those who were reluctant were viewed as misers and avaricious.
   b. Present-day researchers observe few age-specific terms that refer positively to older people.
   c. As long as there are negative attitudes about aging, even initially positive terms may develop into negative stereotypes.
      (1) A study in the 1980s found that even the terms aged person and elderly were considered less than positive.

          (2) Today, just as they did 30 years ago, people in a position of power do not want to be called aged or elderly.

    5. Historians examine magazines, newspapers, poetry, sermons, and other written materials for information about aging in prior times.

       a. Lyrics in the sheet music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries clearly preferred youth and dreaded growing old.

          (1) They depict old age as a time of failing capacities.

          (2) Elders fear that their children will abandon them, and they worry about the death of a spouse, loneliness, disability, and their own death.

          (3) A classic of the period, "Old Joe Has Had His Day," emphasizes the declines of old age.

          (4) A whole series of songs, such as "Will You Love Me When My Face Is Worn and Old?" echoes the fear of loss of attractiveness.

          (5) Perhaps the most poignant is a song, "Over the Hill to the Poor House" (1874).

       b. Songs of recent decades continue the themes of the past:

          (1) The Beatles' song "When I'm 64" asks a man's wife: "Will you still feed me when I'm 64?"

          (2) The Alan Parsons' Project saw aging as a time to simply bid farewell in "Old and Wise."

          (3) Bette Midler's "Hello in There" evoked the compassionate stereotype of old people as lonely.

          (4) One of the biggest country songs of 1990, "Where've You Been?" depicts an elderly woman lying helplessly in a hospital waiting for death and a visit from her husband.

       c. The negative stereotypes still present in popular songs are an example of the cultural lag that makes our attitudes and cultural beliefs slower to change than the technology that has improved our longevity.

          (1) The fears of aging expressed in the songs at the turn of the 20th century were more valid then: resignation and sadness were more appropriate because life expectancy and older people's overall health status was lower.

          (2) Older people are now leading healthier, more active lives.

B. Social Forces: The Media

   1. Television

       a. The Media Watch Task Force, supported by the Gray Panthers, was formed to identify and protest television programs that presented stereotypical and unrealistic portrayals of elderly people.

          (1) Before the 1980s, younger actors portrayed older ones, because it was assumed that older people would not be able to remember their lines.

          (2) Media Watch disbanded in the 1980 as older people became much better represented in television.

       b. Industrial standards have improved the representation of older people thanks to a better understanding of the shifting market potential.

          (1) The Nielsen Television Index did not even regularly identify individuals over 55 years of age until 1977, but not that population is carefully examined.

          (2) There is a great distance to go, though, before ageist stereotypes are eliminated from advertising and programming.

             (a) Much of the information about aging that informs advertising decisions is based on research conducted in the early 1970s and 1980s emphasizing the biological model of cognitive decline.

(b) This is another example of cultural lag between current research on aging and the incorporation of that information into the culture.
c. Older women are particularly slight in television.
   (1) They are underrepresented: only 8 percent or all movie roles and 9 percent of television roles go to women over 40.
   (2) Television typically pairs older women romantically with men who are older, thereby avoiding role models for same-age, or older woman-younger man relationships.
d. Television programming commonly and unfortunately uses a comedy gimmick—a reversed stereotype of aging in which older characters drive race cars, go clubbing, or make reference to their amazing sex lives.
   (1) Such images are intended to be comical, because they are in stark contrast to the stereotype of elders with a low-energy, sedentary lifestyle.
   (2) Reversed stereotypes do more harm than good: laughing at a reversed stereotype demonstrates unconscious, uncritical acceptance of the underlying negative image.
e. Aging experts believe that the television industry needs to revise its unrealistic portrayal of older Americans to reflect the current aging experience.
   (1) The challenge of television is to offer a true portrait of the elderly—a portrait that is constantly changing as one cohort replaces the next and the older cohort grows larger each decade.
   (2) A sensitive, realistic portrayal is the goal: older adults must not be demeaned; television must not gloss over the real problems of aging.
f. Television viewing time increases with age.
   (1) To isolated persons, television commonly acts as a companion: the widowed and lonely often prefer programs that emphasize family solidarity and a sense of belonging.
   (2) To be relevant in a society that is becoming more aged, television programming will need to respond to the numbers, values, and perspectives of the older audience.
      (a) Television programming in the U.S. generally portrays older characters in the role of parents of a main character.
      (b) British public television better represents a broad age range.
2. Advertising and nonverbal communication
a. Television advertising that urges the public to cover up the signs of aging is particularly powerful.
   (1) Advertising tells us that aging is primarily ugly, lonely, and bothersome—unless one looks and acts young.
   (2) Advertisers create markets by instilling a fear of aging of by capitalizing on existing fears.
      (a) Commercials imply that the elderly are sluggish and preoccupied with irregularity, constipation, and sexual performance.
      (b) As a group, they suffer from headaches, nagging backaches, and loose dentures.
      (c) Men are offered alternatives to baldness; both sexes are urged to buy products that will "wash away the gray"; women are urged to soften facial wrinkles and smooth old-looking hands with creams and lotions.
   (3) Advertisers are devoting more advertising time and space to elders as their numbers and buying power increase.
      (a) However, advertisers must be careful not to alienate their target audience: consumers in their 50s and 60s respond best to an actor who is around age 40.

    (b) The internalization of negative images in ads for people in their 50s has caused some of them to ignore ads if the actors are too old: they do not want to identify with the old faces they see on the screen.

  b. Ageist message are nonverbal as well as verbal.

   (1) The use of patronizing communication (over-accommodation in communication based on stereotyped expectations of incompetence) can be as offensively ageist as directly derogatory language.

    (a) According to communication accommodation theory, people modify their speech and behavior based on their assessment of their communication partner.

    (b) If that assessment is based on erroneous stereotypes, the communication can be patronizing and produce the opposite effect than that intended.

   (2) Critics of television ads using older people are frustrated by the image of foolish, out-of-it elders.

 3. Movies

  a. The primary aim of most makers of feature-length commercial films is to reach young people, particularly males between the ages of 16 and 24.

   (1) Many commercially successful movies focus on high-speed chases and violence.

   (2) It is the exceptional movie that stars older persons and promotes understanding of the challenges and joys of aging.

  b. A Chicago philanthropic group gives annual Owl awards to film and television productions that treat older people with respect.

   (1) By drawing attention to outstanding training and educational films about and for older people, the organization added marketing power to the films.

   (2) In 1992, the group did not find a single film of merit in 1992.

C. The Psychology of Prejudice

 1. Those who hold negative stereotypes of aging are prejudiced against older persons.

 2. The two variables go hand in hand: to explain why an individual would subscribe to negative stereotyping is to explain why a person is prejudiced.

 3. One psychological explanation of prejudice against the elderly is self-concept.

  a. Someone with a positive self-concept may be less prone to believe the negative stereotypes of other groups, and, when that person ages, he or she may choose to accept only positive stereotypes of age.

  b. Psychologists use the term projection: if we feel negative about ourselves, we project it on to others.

  c. This might explain why prejudice against elders correlates with one's personal degree of anxiety about death.

 4. Three well-known theories that explain racism may also explain ageism:

  a. The authoritarian personality: less-educated, rigid, untrusting, insecure persons are the ones who hold prejudices.

  b. The frustration-aggression hypothesis: those who are frustrated, perhaps by poverty and low status, take it out in aggression toward others.

  c. Selective perception: we see what we expect to see and selectively ignore what we do not expect to see—our perceptions then confirm our stereotypes.

V. Breaking Negative Stereotypes

A. One way to disprove negative stereotypes of age is to draw attention to people who have made significant contributions in their old age.

1. Michelangelo, Leo Tolstoy, Sigmund Freud, Georgia O'Keefe, Pablo Picasso, and Bertrand Russell continued to produce recognized classics until the end of long lives.
2. Prominent men and women who are still working productively at relatively advanced ages are: the writer Normal Mailer; America's first female poet laureate, Mona Van Duyn; the pianist Alicia de Larrocha; the stage actress Julie Harris; the vocalist Lena Horne; the jazz musician B. B. Kind; the physician Jonas Salk; and the scientist Jane Goodall.
3. Numerous Nobel Prize winners in the sciences every year are 65 or over.

B. Emphasizing the positive
   1. Negative stereotypes must be countered with accurate information.
      a. Many people believe that the mental faculties of older people decline and that most old people are senile.
         (1) Longitudinal studies of the same persons over many years have found little overall decline in intelligence scores.
         (2) Studies show older individuals are as capable of learning as younger people, although the learning process may take more time.
         (3) One longitudinal study of intelligence in people ranging in age from 21 to 70 shows that on two out of four measures intelligence increases with age.
         (4) Few old people ever show overt signs of senility, and those who do can often be helped by treatment.
         (5) Only a small percentage of the elderly have Alzheimer's disease.
      b. Physical stereotypes are as common as mental ones and just as false.
         (1) More positive images are replacing the "rocking chair" stereotype of old age as older Americans stay more physically active and fit.
         (2) Aerobics classes, jogging, walking, tennis, golf, and bicycling have become very popular among this group.
         (3) Many sports now have competition in senior divisions.
            (a) Senior Wimbledon West is held annually in the western U.S.: divisions of this tournament exist for both men and women in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s.
            (b) Golf, swimming, cycling, bowling, softball, competitive weightlifting, and basketball have senior events.
         (4) Sports and physical fitness can extend throughout one's life.
   2. The key ingredient to a long, full life is not physical health, but attitude.
      a. With passion about life—whether this passion is found in career, friendships, or interests—a person can enjoy some of the best and most rewarding years in later life.
      b. Socially committed subjects studied by the elder psychologist, Lee Hurwich, lived in the present, had relationships with people of all ages, were optimistic, and trusted people, even though many suffered physical afflictions that would send most people into despair.

C. Consequences and Implications of Stereotyping
   1. Negative stereotyping of old people has detrimental effects on society in general and old people in particular.
      a. Negative stereotyping perpetuates ageism in our society.
         (1) Ageism increases when society views all old people as senile, decrepit, and rigid.
         (2) These and other negative stereotypes, which do not apply to the majority of elders, reinforce prejudice and lead to discrimination.
         (3) Perpetuating ageism often results in polarization and segregation.
         (4) Real communication cannot take place in a segregated society, and the cycle of stereotyping, ageism, and polarization continues.
      b. Ageism affects professional objectivity.

(1) A study in which clinical psychologists were presented with clinical vignettes in which the ages of clients varied found:
    (a) The psychologists considered depressed older clients to be significantly less ideal than younger clients with identical symptoms and histories.
    (b) Older clients were given poorer prognoses than younger ones.
    (c) Older psychologists were more favorable toward older clients than were young psychologists.
(2) In another study, where an experimental group of medical students participated in four 10-minute group sessions that emphasized psychological and biological knowledge as well as communication skills, found the experimental group developed more positive attitudes and more socially skilled behavior in their work with older adults than did members of a control group.
(3) Employees could relate better to older clients if they rid themselves of negative stereotypes.
    (a) The stereotype that older people are in their second childhood is a poor way to elicit the highest potential return from a person.
    (b) The second-childhood stereotype glosses over the ways he or she is not childlike.

c. Negative stereotyping fosters fear of aging in both old and young.
   (1) One study, which used agree-disagree statements to measure fear of aging, showed a clear and strong relationships between low fear of aging and subjective well-being.
   (2) Those subjects who did not fear aging felt good about themselves and their lives; those who feared aging did not have a good personal sense of well-being.

2. The common stereotypes that old persons are fixated on childhood memories, that youth is best, and that old age contains few satisfactions were dispelled in a longitudinal study Berkeley Older Generation Study.
a. The participants were asked the question, "Looking back, what period of your life brought you the most satisfaction?" when they were, on average, 69 years old and again 14 years later when the average age was 83.
b. The findings remained consistent over time.
   (1) Adolescence was considered the most unsatisfactory time.
   (2) The decade of the respondents' 30s was named the most satisfactory time period (16 percent).
   (3) The period of the 50s was the second most popular (15 percent).
   (4) Old age was seen as more satisfying than childhood: 12 percent said their 60s brought them the most satisfaction; 13 percent, their 70s; 5 percent, their 80s.

3. Negative stereotyping stifles the potential of older people and draws potential away from happy, sociable, successful, active oldsters.
a. A self-fulfilling prophecy is created: older people do not do anything because they assume they are not able.
b. Their lives, therefore, are neither as satisfying nor as fulfilling as they might be.

4. We have hardly begun to explore the potential of elders in this society.
a. Too often large companies try to remove older persons from the labor market to make room for the young.
b. Too often we provide no alternative ways for elders to make contributions.
c. Too often society works against elders instead of for them.
d. We need to put more though and effort into conserving a valuable natural resource: older Americans.