

Bridging the Gap:

Young Adults Perceptions of Aging

Numerous studies over the past few decades have concentrated on the changes that have occurred in the various types of relationships individuals experience across their life course. Demographers point to the fact that today's older adults are living longer than they ever have for various reasons, many of them relating to advancements in medicine and technology. Such advancements have led to an increase in the amount of interaction between older adults and younger adults, sparking an interest in how younger adults view the aging population.

When studying the ways college students perceive and judge older adults, the process of aging, and the expectations they have for their own future as older adults, it is important to recognize the various intergenerational relationships that exist in refining these perceptions. The frequency of households headed by grandparents raising grandchildren in the United States has increased to nearly 2.5 million.¹

For younger adults who do not have existing relationships with family members who are older adults, it is likely that they can attribute the ideas and stereotypes they have of aging adults to other inlets such as the media, popular culture, and other experiences with older adults whether at home, at work, or in interactions in the community. Despite the increase in intergenerational contact, negative stereotypes of older adults and the aging process remain a persistent problem in the United States. This study examines the attitudes of American college students regarding their perceptions of older adults, the aging process, and their own expectations of aging into their older years.

Literature Review

Increased Life Expectancy for Older Adults

Today's older adults are living longer than the same demographic did in the past. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau in 2021 show that an estimated 16.8 percent of the United States population consisted of individuals aged 65 years or older.² For the purpose of this research, age 65 and older is the definition of "older adults," in line with the Administration on Aging of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.³ The percentage of older adults is expected to increase to over 21 percent by 2034.⁴ As this age group is growing extensively from year to year, there is a high demand for professionals educated in assisting and caring for aging adults in need. Between 2020 and 2030, it is predicted that healthcare occupations will add around 2.6 million new jobs in order to better accommodate the growing number of aging adults.⁵ Further, the same study stressed that the importance of these professionals working alongside the older population is to better understand the aging and dying processes. The fact that older adults in America are living longer will affect the presence of intergenerational relationships across the life course. Increased likelihood of these relationships among family members must be affecting (and will continue to affect) the ways that various generations view, treat, and observe one another.⁶

Challenges Facing Older Adults

The dramatic increase of the older adult population has shed light on several health concerns surrounding older adults. One of the more pressing issues is the lack of resources that are available for the aging population and the family members who care for them.⁷ Unavailable resources, such as emotional, educational, and financial resources, are pertinent to maintaining the well-being of older adults; increasing these resources can tremendously improve their overall health and quality of life. Another resource that seems to be unavailable is specialized health care

for chronic conditions. Older adults are often unable to manage the problems that come with chronic physical conditions and the lack of education and information surrounding these conditions only worsens the suffering. However, many older adults have family members who are willing to step in and care for them with any chronic conditions they might have. It is estimated that family members save the health care system \$470 billion per year.⁸ While this may seem like a benefit on the surface, when one looks deeper, they will see that, in reality, it is creating an unending dilemma for these families. As families take off work to care for their older family members, they are missing out on paychecks. Over 75 percent of care-taking adults reported significant out of pocket expenses related to their caregiving.⁹ The number of working families that had to face this challenge caused the reform of the medical leave policy. The updated policy included that family members were allowed to take up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave to care for a parent with a serious health condition.¹⁰ The downside to this, however, is that chronic health conditions can last much longer than twelve weeks, leaving older adults without care, or leaving family members in a predicament between working for pay or taking care of family. For older adults without family to take care of them, they have no choice but to rely on the healthcare system. Medical assistance can be very costly, and unfortunately, Medicare does not cover all the expenses that older adults might need. To accommodate the growing population of older adults, there must be a change in the health care system to provide a better range of practical care for this cohort.¹¹ Thanks to the growing elder population, coupled with the increased demands for caregiving, more Americans today are confronted with aging and its challenges than previous generations.

Concerns and Fears about the Aging Process

Elizabeth L. Hay, Karen L. Fingerman, and Eva S. Lefkowitz¹² conducted a study to observe the worries that adult children have for their aging parents. Primarily, it was observed that adult children mostly worried for their parents' health. Adversely, aging parents worried most for their children's health, safety, relationships, and finances.¹³ When it comes to mental illness, such as memory loss, and seeking help for those illnesses, both younger and older adults felt similarly in that they believed people should seek help for any mental problems. However, older adults were more likely to feel that mental illness was embarrassing, and this could potentially create a difference in willingness to seek help for mental illness in the future.¹⁴ Similarly, Alissa Dark-Freudeman, Robin L. West, and Kristen M. Viverito¹⁵ studied the concept of "possible selves"—specifically in the domain of memory and cognition of older adults in the future. They found that memory loss with age is one of the "most dreaded" characteristics of an individual's own future self.¹⁶

Findings from an analysis of a longitudinal study of the trends and perceptions of older adults from 1974 to 2000 concluded that, in 1974, adults under the age of 65 perceived loneliness to be a more serious issue for older adults than issues such as job opportunities and medical care.¹⁷ In contrast, older adults from the 1974 sample were more likely to report fears of not having enough money, having poor health, and being victims of crime.¹⁸ Yet, by 2000, both age groups were more concerned about older adults having the financial means to survive. These findings show how the concerns surrounding older adults have changed over the past three decades to reflect that more and more older adults are suffering financial strains and worry.¹⁹

Intergenerational Interactions

When studying the ways that college students perceive and judge older adults, it is important to recognize the various intergenerational relationships that exist today. In fact, there has been a recent trend of increased households headed by grandparents raising grandchildren.²⁰ According to sources, grandparents in the United States are gaining new roles when it comes to grandchildren because grandparents are often out of the work force at the time their children are mostly at the height of their careers.²¹ There has also been an increase of children living with grandparents and being responsible for primary care. In addition, with the increased cost of living expenses, the number of multigenerational households has continued to rise, from 7 percent in 1971 to over 17 percent in 2021.²² These relationships with older adults are often what create the perceptions and stereotypes of both younger and older generations. For younger adults who do not have existing relationships with family members who are older adults, it is likely that they can attribute these ideas and stereotypes of aging adults to other inlets such as media, popular culture, and other experiences with older adults.

College Students' Perceptions of Older Adults and Aging

A study done in 2013²³ comparing ageism in college students in the United States and China found that U.S. college students viewed older adults more positively than Chinese students. This can likely be attributed to the presence of filial piety in Chinese culture versus an absence of filial piety in American culture. Filial piety in Chinese culture refers to taking care of older adults in poor health.²⁴ The addition of filial piety leaves Chinese students with a higher responsibility for taking care of their grandparents, whereas American students are not the ones who are doing the caregiving. Therefore, students in the U.S. are not left with the “burden” of caring for older adults, since that task is usually given to their parents or to older adult care

facilities. In addition, it is likely that Chinese students' experiences with older adults is limited to their relationships with their grandparents, whereas American students may have more opportunity to interact with older adults outside of their family.²⁵ Despite the absence of filial piety in the United States, ageism still exists at high rates. A study of ageism in the United States found that approximately 85 percent of older adults have experienced ageism in some way.²⁶ Ageism is a present problem in the United States, and it requires further studies to understand the factors that contribute to it, and ways in which to educate society on the issue, in hopes of eradicating the problem as the number of older adults continues to increase.

Existing stereotypes and perceptions of the aging process, older adults, and life after 65 could potentially affect the lives of future generations of older adults and the individuals around them. Specifically, this study intends to discover the problems and quality of life perceived to exist in the lives of aging adults possessed by college students today. Understanding the ways that young adults view themselves growing older could shed light on the ways that future generations may choose to change the reality of older adults in the United States.

Methods

Participants

The participants consisted of 154 students from a small comprehensive university in the Midwest who were recruited using a random sampling technique. Table 1 below summarizes the sample characteristics. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 ($M = 19.8$, $SD = 1.362$). A variety of ethnicities were represented in our study, though the majority were Caucasian at 87.1 percent. There was a significant divide regarding sex among the participants, with 75.7 percent identifying as females and 24.3 percent identifying as males. Of these participants 19.4 percent had previously taken a course on aging.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Sex	Female: 63.1 percent Male: 24.3 percent	Race	White: 87.1 percent Other: 12.9 percent
Taken a course in aging	Yes: 19.4 percent No: 80.6 percent		
Lived with a grandparent for any amount of time as a child	Yes: 21.7 percent No: 78.3 percent		
Frequency of Interaction with Person over 65: Relative	Once/week or more: 37.7 percent Less than once/week: 62.3 percent		
Frequency of Interaction with Person over 65: Non-relative	Once/week or more: 57.3 percent Less than once/week: 42.7 percent		

Procedure

Emails were sent to potential participants selected through a random sampling process that drew from all eligible students at a small, private, comprehensive college in the Midwest. The study had 150 participants that fit the following criteria: 1) Participants must be between the ages of 18 and 24, and 2) participants must be traditional students currently enrolled at a university. The questionnaire was constructed and delivered in an online format. Due to the survey being slightly longer than average, this study offered an incentive for participants. Before the informed consent and survey, participants saw a screen with the following information: “When you complete this survey, you will have a chance to win a \$100 Amazon.com Gift Card. Your contact information will be recorded separately from the survey and will in no way be connected to your responses.”

No questions (except the agreement to the informed consent) required an answer. At the end of the survey, the participants were thanked for their time and taken to a separate screen; they were not required to continue beyond this point. There was no way to track who decided to participate in the reward process, and in no way was the survey linked to the reward process.

Upon accessing the online questionnaire, participants were presented with the informed consent and were asked to check a box indicating that they had read all of the information and that they were willing to participate voluntarily in the study. After providing consent, the participants were granted access to a 37-item online questionnaire (Appendix) intended to collect data on their attitudes toward and perceptions of older adults and the aging process, as well as their interactions with older adults and fears of self-aging. Questions were separated into topics on the participants' perceptions of older adults, the participants' perception of self as an older adult, concerns for older adults, and what defines being an older adult. This included asking about who participants think will care for them when they become an older adult (spouse, friend, children, professional care-taker, other), at what age they perceive men and women to be old (ranging from 40 to 86+), and what events they would say best defines the beginning of old age (retirement, becoming a grandparent, decline in physical ability, decline in mental functioning, reaching a specific age, unsure, and other). Note: current research and trends in gerontology (the scientific study of age, the aging process, and the aged) prefer the use of "older adults" or "elders" in place of the term "elderly" because of the negative connotation of frequency and infirmity that "elderly" carries with it. Building from previous research²⁷ that analyzed changing perceptions of adults over age 65 in two datasets collected by the National Council on Aging (one from 1974²⁸ and one from 2000²⁹), several of the same questions were asked that had been asked in 1974 and 2000. Specifically:

- In general, which one of the following events best defines the beginning of old age in America today?
- Generally speaking, do you feel that people over 65 get too much, too little, or just about the right amount of respect from younger people these days?

- How serious a problem would you say each of the following concerns is for most people over 65 these days?

The present study was interested to see if the perceptions of participants in our sample were different than those found in previous timeframes.

The purpose behind this research study was to evaluate and better understand young adults' perceptions and ideas concerning older adults/elders (individuals 65 years of age and older), their perceptions regarding the aging process, and their perceptions of their future aged selves. Participants were asked to reflect on four things: 1) interactions with older adults; 2) perceptions of older adults and the aging process; 3) stereotypes and fears attached to aging and the aging process; and 4) personal expectations of aging.

Results

This research identified three hypotheses: 1) young adults will have mildly negative attitudes and perceptions of older adults; 2) young adults will have strongly negative attitudes and perceptions of the aging process; and 3) young adults will have strong fears about their own aging process.

Perceptions of Older Adults

Using a semantic differential scale, respondents were asked to rate various stereotypes as they applied to older adults. Overall, the majority of responses were positive but there were some stereotypical negative views. For example, the majority of respondents consider older adults to be somewhat or very old-fashioned (72.2 percent), while no respondents considered older adults to be very modern. In addition, respondents considered older adults to be far more fragile (58.6 percent) as opposed to being strong (24.3 percent). Despite these two negative perceptions, Table 2 highlights how participants' overall beliefs and stereotypes produced more positive than

negative conclusions about older adults, with bolded items indicating more than 50 percent of participants chose that response.

Table 2. Response of “Very or Somewhat” to Semantic Differential Pairings on Common Perceptions of Being Older, in percentages

Perception	Percent Responding Agree	Perception	Percent Responding Agree
Old-Fashioned	72.3	Modern	18.3
Fragile	58.6	Strong	24.3
Inflexible	41.7	Adaptable	41.0
Lonely	41.3	Social	43.5
Dependent	36.7	Independent	48.2
Forgotten	27.3	Loved	59.7
Immobile	20.8	Mobile	63.0
Irritable	19.0	Pleasant	54.0
Senile	16.1	Alert	52.6
Naïve	11.7	Wise	81.0

With regard to the respect given to older adults, Table 3 shows the perceptions of respect for older adults; 73 percent of respondents reported that older adults do not receive enough respect from others, which indicates a recognition of the disparity level of respect present in America for our older generations. Since this is a question that had been posed in the early studies from which we drew this question, the study included a comparison of proportions test to determine if the findings in this study were statistically significant in their difference from the 2000 “American Perceptions on Aging” study. Both in 2000 and today, relatively few members of the studies believed that elders receive too much respect; however, fewer of the participants in the current study believed they receive too little respect ($\chi^2 = 9.321$; $p = 0.0023$) with more believing they receive just the right amount ($\chi^2 = 7.630$; $p = 0.0057$).

Table 3. How Much Respect Do People over 65 Get from Younger People, in percentage

Level of Respect	Percent Responding Agree	Percent Responding Agree in 2000 (ages 18-29)	Difference from 2000
Too Much	4.1	2.4	+1.7
Too Little	73.0	82.8	-9.8**
Just the Right Amount	22.9	14.6	+8.3**

** $p = 0.01$

It is important to note, however, that the question inquired how participants viewed the level of respect given to older adults overall, not necessarily the level of respect they personally grant older adults.

To tap into specific stereotypes that young adults might have about older adults, researchers asked participants their level of agreement with common negative perceptions of older adults, such as the stereotypes of the “greedy geezer” or bad driver. Table 4 shows that the largest percentages of agreement came from concerns about health-related stereotypes, many of which also are serious concerns for elders.

Table 4. Level of Agreement with Common Older Adult Stereotypes, in percentages

Statement	Strongly Agree or Agree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Percent Agree in 2000 (ages 18-29)	Difference from 2000
More than half of all older people will spend some time in a nursing home before they die.	54.5	23.8	61.7	-7.2
Medicare should be expanded to pay for long-term care.	46.1	14.3	83.7	-37.6****
The government should provide tax credit to employers to hire and re-train older workers.	40.3	24.0	70.9	-30.6****

Old people are among the worst drivers in the country.	34.4	40.9	57.8	-23.4***
Some of the money spent on Social Security should go to children instead of older people.	24.7	44.8	36.9	-12.2**
Old people have too much political influence.	16.9	50.6	16.7	+0.2
People who are 65 are more valuable employees than people who are 25.	12.3	44.8	29.6	-17.3***
Employers who provide pension plans are also required to provide health insurance to their retirees.	11.7	27.3	54.4	-42.7***
People who are 65 are more valuable employees than people who are 45.	7.8	48.7	18.2	-10.4**
Medicare pays for just about 100 percent of doctor's bills for people over the age of 65.	6.5	50.0	24.8	-18.3***
Old people are greedy geezers.	5.8	79.9	4.9	+0.9

**** $p = 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$**

Most interesting, though, was the comparison between perceptions from the current study and from the previous findings from 2000. Other than a slight change in perceptions about the amount of political influence seniors have and the perception of the “greedy geezer” (both of which were similar and relatively low in overall levels of agreement for both studies), the agreement of the respondents in the current study were lower than in 2000. In particular, the statements concerning greater equality or autonomy for elders saw some of the largest declines over the last two decades, with lower agreement in the current study for expanded Medicare for long-term care (37.6 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 139.701$; $p < 0.0001$), tax credit for employers to re-train older workers (30.6 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 64.646$; $p < 0.0001$), and the value of older workers compared to 45-year-olds (10.4 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 10.881$; $p = 0.001$) and 25-year-olds (17.3

percent lower; $\chi^2 = 21.403$; $p < 0.0001$). On the other hand, respondents in the current study were less likely to perceive that older adults were among the worst drivers (23.4 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 32.679$; $p < 0.0001$) or that funds for Social Security should be diverted to children instead of older adults (12.2 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 9.431$; $p = 0.0021$). Finally, it is worth noting that participants in the current study seemed more aware of the fiscal realities facing older adult compared to their counterparts from 2000: those in the current study were significantly less likely to believe that employers are required to provide insurance after retirement (42.7 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 107.112$; $p < 0.0001$) or that Medicare covers 100 percent of medical expenses (18.3 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 26.968$; $p < 0.0001$).

Perceptions of the Aging Process

Beyond perceptions of older adults, participants responded to questions about their perceptions of the aging process, its components, and how aging looks and feels in America today. Table 5 displays the level of agreement that respondents had to various issues being a “very serious problem” for older adults. In addition, Table 5 compares the findings from the current study with the previous study’s percent of adults aged 18 to 29 in 2000 who also agreed that these issues are a “very serious problem” for older adults. Though differences were found between the two groups for all questions, the drop in the percent who viewed “not enough job opportunities” ($\chi^2 = 32.753$; $p < 0.0001$), “fear of crime” ($\chi^2 = 54.959$; $p < 0.0001$), and “not having enough money to live” ($\chi^2 = 8.177$; $p = 0.004$) as very serious problems facing older adults indicates that participants in the current study viewed these concerns as significantly less pressing for older adults than previous generations did. In contrast, the only number to increase from 2000 to the current study was in the category of “poor health.”

Table 5. Perceives Issues as a "Very Serious Problem" for Older Adults, in percentage

Issue	Percent Responding Agree	Percent Responding Agree in 2000 (ages 18-29)	Difference from 2000
Poor Health	60.4	53.4	+9.4
Loneliness	46.1	47.3	-1.2
Not Having Enough Money to Live	40.9	52.7	-11.8**
Often Feeling Sad or Blue	29.2	37.9	-8.7
Limited Access to Physician	24.7	30.1	-5.4
Not Enough Job Opportunities	24.7	48.3	-23.6***
Fear of Crime	13.0	43.2	-30.2***

** $p = 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

When asked to consider the expected events that define “old age” in America, only the decline in physical ability received at least one-third of the participants’ agreement, which was not much different from participants in 2000. As Table 6 shows, unlike the perceived stereotype agreement, however, the participants in the current study were more likely than in 2000 to agree that retirement (8.3 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 6.648$; $p = 0.0099$) and reaching a specific age (6.9 percent lower; $\chi^2 = 4.594$; $p = 0.0321$) were the defining markers of older adulthood. The greatest decline in agreement between the two groups was on the belief that declining mental functioning was the marker of old age, with 10.3 percent lower level of agreement in the current sample than in 2000 ($\chi^2 = 7.029$; $p = 0.0080$).

Table 6. Event that Defines Old Age in America, in percentage

Event	Percent Responding Agree	Percent Responding Agree in 2000 (ages 18-29)	Difference from 2000
Decline in physical ability	33.6	38.6	-5.0
Retirement	22.4	14.1	+8.3**
Reaching a specific age	22.4	15.5	+6.9*
Decline in mental functioning	16.4	26.7	-10.3**

Becoming a grandparent	5.2	5.1	+0.1
------------------------	-----	-----	------

p* = 0.05; *p* = 0.01

When considering gender and the aging process, neither women nor men were more likely to report fearing the aging process, and gender was not a predictor in the types of fears reported. In addition, respondents defined old age to be of the same age range in both men (61-65, 28.9 percent) and women (61-65, 26.4 percent). However, more respondents overall considered women to reach older age sooner than men. Regardless, it is important to note that the difference in the beginning stages of “old age” between women and men is telling in the continued stereotypes of gendered aging, even as more women (and men) age healthfully into their later years.

Perceptions of the Aging Self

Beyond the perceptions that participants had about older adults and the process of becoming one, participants offered responses about the perceptions of *themselves* as older adults. When asked how participants expected to spend their time once they retired or were unable to work full-time, traveling (86.3 percent), watching grandchildren (78.8 percent), and taking up new hobbies (69.2 percent) were the most frequently selected. However, as shown in Table 7, participants imagined an active life in their older years, as nearly all of the activities we listed were selected by or above the majority of respondents.

Table 7. Most Common Expected Activities for Self in Older Years, in percentage

Activity	Percent Selecting Activity
Traveling	86.3
Watching grandchildren	78.8
Taking up new hobbies	69.2
Visiting adult children	57.5
Doing volunteer work	54.1

Joining new social groups	49.3
Visiting siblings	48.6
Gardening/home improvement	45.9

In addition, Table 8 highlights the types of experiences that participants expect will be important or very important to them in making their later years meaningful and vital. As with the previous table, these findings indicate an expectation for a full, active, connected life in their older years. Given the concerns that participants had for the aging experience, it is unsurprising that the most likely chosen experience participants imagined would be important to them as they aged was taking care of their health (93.2 percent).

Table 8. Experiences Perceived as a "Very Important" or "Important" for Themselves as Older Adults, in percentage

Experiences	Percent Responding the Experience is Important
Taking care of your health	93.2
Having close relationship with friends and family	93.2
Having opportunities to use your skills	80.3
Having new learning experiences	75.7
Having a rich spiritual life	61.5
Being involved in your community	58.8
Having a job	53.1
Having a sexual relationship	46.0

Not all the experiences that participants imagined for themselves in their older years were positive. As Table 9 shows, participants worried over many of the same concerns they had for elders today, though often to a greater extent than they imagined current elders faced.

Table 9. Concerns of “Very Worried” for Self at Age 75, in percentage

Self-Concern	Percent Responding Very Worried
Losing your memory	70.4
Suffering from uncontrollable pain	46.5
Not having enough opportunities to be productive	45.6
Outliving your pension and savings	35.2
Spending all your money on long-term care	29.1
Denied medical treatment because of your age	28.2

It is interesting to note some comparisons to the concerns they had for themselves as they age and for older adults today. Though not an identical analog, the percent of participants who believed that older adults today faced not having enough money to live (40.9 percent) similarly were concerned that they would outlive their pension and savings (35.2 percent) and not have opportunities to be productive (45.6 percent).

Discussion

Perceptions of Older Adults

Participants’ perceptions of older adults may reflect how they will view themselves as older adults and the way they believe they should be treated when they become older adults. Changing false or over-dramatized perceptions of older adults may shape how young adults treat older adults now and in the future. The majority of our sample expect (53.3 percent) or think there is a possibility (33.1 percent) they will interact with or care for older adults in their careers in the years to come. In addition, nearly all participants (96.2 percent) reported that they expect to work with older adults in their future careers. Given the likelihood of interaction between these participants and older adults in their future personal and professional lives, the lack of negative or misinformed opinions regarding older adults is encouraging.

When comparing our data to the 2000's dataset from the National Council on Aging, there was a significant difference between reported levels of respect. The amount that said that older adults received "too little" respect decreased, while the amount that said older adults received "just the right amount" of respect increased. However, respondents also reported that they perceive older adults as mostly frail and/or fragile. This is not surprising considering that other parts of the data have concluded that younger adults consider physical decline to be a significant characteristic of the aging process.

Perceptions of the Aging Process

When looking at the comparison of proportions between the 2000's dataset from the National Council on Aging and this study's dataset, it was noted that there was a significant difference between respondents' perceptions of very serious problems for older adults. In the categories of not having enough job opportunities, fear of crime, and not having enough money to live, our study found younger adults today are less worried about these issues. This is likely the case for multiple reasons: 1) younger adults are more educated about older adults in general; and 2) these social issues have improved since 2000. However, our study found that participants were more likely to perceive "poor health" as a serious problem today than in 2000. This is likely attributable to an increase in interactions with older adults and is consistent with previous literature on how increased interactions with older adults often revolve around increased caregiving and growing costs and issues of healthcare.

Further, when looking at perceptions of the aging process, respondents answered that the decline of physical ability (33.6 percent) is the most significant marker of one having reached older age. However, when asked to reflect upon themselves as older adults, they had the greatest fear of mental loss (70.4 percent) in comparison to physical decline or pain (46.5 percent). This

could be attributed to the fact that physical ability is often easier to see in others, whereas mental loss is more hidden. Such findings suggest that while one may view the aging process in others a certain way, they may view the aging process for themselves differently.

Additionally, it was found that participants reported women moving into the aging process prior to men, and this is likely connected to the socialization process of aging in America. From a young age American women are encouraged to mask or prevent the aging process, potentially creating the idea that women are aging sooner because they take actions to prevent aging earlier in life. Additionally, the media contributes largely to the way society views the aging process; in turn labeling the graying man as a ‘silver fox’ and a graying woman as failing to take care of herself.

Despite participants perceiving women as aging faster than men, it can be said that young adults are at least moderately informed of some of the issues that older adults face. When asked about the limitations of Medicare coverage and Social Security allocation, 46.1 percent of respondents reported that Medicare should be expanded to pay for long term care and only a quarter believed that some of the money spent on Social Security should go to children instead of older people. This is despite 80.6 percent of respondents reporting that they had never taken a gerontology class or course related to the aging process.

Perceptions of the Aging Self

Despite participants' concerns for the aging process, most respondents had wide-ranging expectations for their own older years. For example, many students reported an importance of traveling (86.3 percent), watching grandchildren (78.8 percent), and taking up new hobbies (69.2 percent). It is interesting to note here that when it came to perceiving older adults as “very or somewhat fragile,” 58.6 percent of respondents answered in this way. It appears that being

fragile does not seem to have an impact on how students feel their time will be spent when they are older because the most desired activity was traveling, which requires mobility. Also, 42.6 percent of students perceived not having enough money to live on as a very serious problem for older adults. However, they do not seem to have the same ideas of themselves when they become older adults because again, traveling costs money. In addition, nearly all participants believed that taking care of their health and having close relationships with their friends and family (both 93.2 percent), as well as having the opportunity to use their skills (80.3 percent) were very important or important experiences in making their later years meaningful and vital.

It was also discovered that young adults hold a more positive association with their personal aging process. The positive or negative perceptions of the self-aging process for themselves as older adults certainly shapes the way young adults approach becoming older and how they prepare for their future as older adults. Such perceptions are also likely to impact the value young adults place in creating these types of experiences for other older adults.

Limitations

The results of this study will have limited generalizability to college students from similar universities. Additionally, the data from the National Council on Aging was limited to ages 18-29, whereas our dataset included ages 18-24. Further, students who live on campus away from their families are less likely to interact with older adults than students who live at home and commute. They are less likely to observe if their parents are calling into work in order to take an older adult to a doctor's appointment, or to take care of them on their own. This could be why there is some disparity between how the perception of being independent in one's older years and having to take off work to care for an older adult.

Conclusion

Future research could focus on the nature of the interactions between younger and older adults, to determine whether perceived positive or negative interactions were underlying motivations for beliefs about older adults and the aging process. As the Baby Boomer generation is only now beginning to enter the later years, the beliefs about older adults and their ability to live longer, healthier, and stay more active have the potential to change dramatically when such a large cohort moves into that stage of the life course. Additional research is needed to continue to study these perceptions across age groups and with a nationally representative sample as the Baby Boomer generation continues to move into and through the older years.

ENDNOTES

¹ Tavia Simmons and Jane Lawler Dye, "Grandparents Living with Grandchildren: 2000," U.S. Census Bureau (2003).

² U.S. Census Bureau, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Single Year of Age and Sex for the United States: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2021," Dataset, *National Population by Characteristics: 2020-2021*.

³ Administration on Aging, "2020 Profile of Older Americans," <https://acl.gov/aging-and-disability-in-america/data-and-research/profile-older-americans>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Occupational Outlook Handbook," *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jill A. Bennet and Marna K. Flaherty-Robb, "Issues Affecting the Health of Older Citizens: Meeting the Challenge," *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing* 8, no. 2 (2003): 78-87.

⁸ Susan Reinhard, Lynn Friss Feinberg, Ari Houser, Rita Choula, Molly Evans, "Valuing the Invaluable: 2019 Update, the Growing Contributions and Costs of Family Caregiving," *AARP Public Policy Institute*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, "Wage and Hour Division – The Family and Medical Leave Act," *Department of Labor*, 2018.

¹¹ Tony Y. Yang and Gilbert Grimm, "Caring for Elder Parents: A Comparative Evaluation of Family Leave Laws," *Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 501-513.

¹² Elizabeth L. Hay, Karen L. Fingerman, and Eva S. Lefkowitz, "The Worries Adult Children and Their Parents Experience for one Another," *International Journal for Aging and Human Development* 67, no. 2 (2008): 101-127.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ D.L. Segal, F.L. Collidge, M.S. Mincic, and A. O'Riley, "Beliefs about Mental Illness and Willingness to Seek Help: A Cross-sectional Study," *Aging and Mental Health* 9, no. 4 (2005): 363-367.

¹⁵ Alissa Dark-Freudeman, Robin L. West, and Kristen M. Viverito, "Future Selves and Aging: Older Adults' Memory Fears," *Educational Gerontology* 32, (2006): 85-109.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mari Plikuhn, Ashlee Niehaus, and Rebecca D. Reeves, "65 Isn't What it Used to Be: Changes and Trends in Perceptions of Older Adults," *International Social Science Review* 88, no. 3 (2014): 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lindsay A. Baker, Merrill Silverstein, and Norella M. Putney, "Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in the United States: Changing Family Forms, Stagnant Social Policies," *Journal of Societal & Social Policy* 7, (2008): 53.

²¹ Settles, Barbara H., Jia Zhao, Karen Doneker Mancini, Amanda Rich, Shawneila Pierre, and Atieno Oduor. "Grandparents Caring for Their Grandchildren: Emerging Roles and Exchanges in Global Perspectives." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 40, no. 5 (2009): 827-48.

²² D'Vera Cohn, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Rachel Minkin, Richard Fry and Kiley Hurst, "Financial Issues Top the List of Reasons U.S. Adults Live in Multigenerational Homes," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/03/24/financial-issues-top-the-list-of-reasons-u-s-adults-live-in-multigenerational-homes/>

²³ Baozhen Luo, Kui Zhou, Eun Jin, Alisha Newman, and Jiayin Liang, "Ageism Among College Students: A Comparative Study between US and China," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 28, no. 1 (2013): 49-63.

²⁴ Sheung-Tak Cheng and Alfred C. Chan, "Filial Piety and Psychological Well-Being in Well Older Chinese," *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 61, no. 5 (2006): 262-269.

²⁵ Lou et al., "Ageism Among College Students," 49-63.

²⁶ Sandra L. McGuire, Diane A. Klein, and Shu-Li Chen, "Ageism Revisited: A Study Measuring Ageism in East Tennessee," *Nursing and Health Sciences* 10, (2008): 11-16.

²⁷ Mari Plikuhn, Ashlee Niehaus, and Rebecca D. Reeves, "65 Isn't What it Used to Be: Changes and Trends in Perceptions of Older Adults."

²⁸ National Council on Aging, *Myth and Reality of Aging*, 1974 [Computer file]. ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [producer and distributor], 1997.

²⁹ Neal E. Cutler and Nancy A. Whitelaw, *American Perceptions of Aging in the 21st Century*, 2000 [Computer file]. ICPSR version. New York, NY: Louis Harris and Associates [producer], 2000. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2002.