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This Old Stereotype: The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Elderly Stereotype

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Americans stereotype elderly people as warm and incompetent, following from perceptions of them as noncompetitive and low status, respectively. This article extends existing research regarding stereotyping of older people in two ways. First, we discuss whether the mixed elderly stereotype is unique to American culture. Data from six non-U.S. countries, including three collectivist cultures, demonstrate elderly stereotypes are consistent across varied cultures. Second, we investigate the persistence of the evaluatively-mixed nature of the elderly stereotype. In an experiment, 55 college students rated less competent elderly targets (stereotype-consistent) as warmer than more competent (stereotype-inconsistent) and control elderly targets. We also discuss the type of discrimination—social exclusion—that elderly people often endure.

Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."
Said the little old man, "I do that too."
The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."
"I do that too," laughed the little old man.
Said the little boy, "I often cry."
The old man nodded, "So do I."
"But worst of all," said the boy, "it seems
Grown-ups don't pay attention to me."
And he felt the warmth of the wrinkled old hand.
"I know what you mean," said the little old man.
Silverstein, 1981, "The Little Boy and the Old Man"

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The brand of prejudice conveyed in this children's poem differs from the hostile, aggressive kind that we are used to hearing about. Some groups, including elderly people, face a more complex brand of prejudice that comprises both negative and subjectively positive beliefs, feelings, and behaviors (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999; Glick & Fiske, 1996).

This article aims to convey three ideas. First, the elderly stereotype is evaluatively mixed. Extensive research shows that mainstream society stereotypes elderly people as warm (positive), but also as incompetent (negative; Cuddy & Fiske, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 1999; Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989; Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991). This stereotype is predicted by the perceived social position of elderly people, and itself predicts the kinds of emotional prejudices they are likely to face (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Second, the elderly stereotype is pervasive. Recent data show that this mixed stereotype crosses national and cultural boundaries; ageism is pan-cultural (Cuddy, Fiske, Kwan, et al., 2004; Harwood et al., 1996). Third, the evaluatively-mixed nature of the elderly stereotype is persistent. As we will discuss, when elderly people behave consistently with the negative part of the elderly stereotype—incompetence—they are viewed more favorably on the unrelated positive part of the elderly stereotype—warmth. Finally, we will explore how the contents of the elderly stereotype translate into the kinds of discrimination directed at elderly people.

How Groups, Including Elderly People, are Sorted into Evaluatively-Mixed Clusters

The stereotype content model (SCM) is a framework that describes and predicts how groups are “sorted” in a given society, and how a group's position in this assortment relates to the types of prejudice its members might suffer (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 1999). Based on two primary dimensions of stereotypes, warmth and competence, the SCM yields four clusters of groups—two that are evaluatively consistent (high/high or low/low) and two that are evaluatively inconsistent (high/low or low/high). Diverging from earlier work on prejudice as one-dimensional antipathy (e.g., Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1981), the SCM focuses on the evaluatively inconsistent, or mixed, clusters comprising groups stereotyped as competent and cold or as warm and incompetent.

The SCM's two critical dimensions of stereotypes, warmth and competence, have emerged as key trait dimensions from several areas of social psychological inquiry, including person perception (Asch, 1946; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968), interpersonal relations (Bakan, 1966; Bales, 1970), group perception (Peeters, 1992; Peeters, Cammaert, & Czapinski, 1997; Phalet & Poppe, 1997), and sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Spence & Helmreich, 1979), to name a few.

Focused investigations of specific groups suggest that many are stereotyped as high on one dimension (i.e., warmth or competence) and low on the other. For example, Asian Americans are respected for their perceived competence and ambition, but disliked for their perceived lack of sociability (Ho & Jackson, 2001; Hurh & Kim, 1989; Kitano & Sue, 1973; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005). In the opposite corner, disabled people, for example, are viewed as incompetent (even in domains that are irrelevant to their disability), but also as socially sensitive (McGroarty & Fiske, 1997) and moral (Weinberg, 1976). In short, these investigations suggest that the paired stereotype content dimensions of warmth and competence often are at odds, resulting in evaluatively-inconsistent stereotypes.

Social Structure Predicts Stereotypes

Perceived social structural relationships with other groups predict where a group will fall in this map of stereotypes (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 1999). Groups that are perceived as competitive are stereotyped as lacking warmth. Asians and Jews in America—two groups that are portrayed as competing with mainstream society for economic and educational resources (Glick & Fiske, 2001)—are rated as significantly less warm than middle-class people and Christians (both majority groups). Disabled people and housewives—neither of which is viewed as competing for economic and educational resources—are rated as warmer than virtually all other groups, including most majority groups. A group's position on the competence dimension can be predicted from their perceived status relative to other groups in society. High status groups (e.g., rich people) are believed to be competent, while low status groups (e.g., poor people) are believed to be incompetent, presumably based on the common but flawed assumption that status invariably derives from ability (as opposed to such factors as opportunity, inheritance, or luck; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 1999).

Theories of legitimizing ideologies support the SCM's theoretical connection between social structure and stereotype content. Legitimizing ideologies relieve people's compunction about cooperating in social systems that inflict pain on others, by explaining the systems as fair. For example, according to just world theory (Lerner & Miller, 1978), people are motivated by self-interest to believe that those who suffer have brought about their own misery. Just-world thinkers would likely view status as a direct result of competence, and warmth as earning cooperation. In a related vein, system-justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) argues that stereotypes legitimate social systems. Thus, in a system with clear status differences, high status confers favorable competence stereotypes for perceivers in the dominant group. To lessen the dominant group's responsibility for inequalities among groups, cooperative subordinate groups are granted warmth stereotypes.

Also, system-justification theory explains that even disadvantaged groups are motivated to believe in the fairness of structural inequality, in the belief that they might yet succeed, in turn endorsing their own group's negative stereotypes (Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001).

The Elderly Stereotype: Warm But Not Competent

Across multiple methods, studies, and populations elderly people have been consistently stereotyped as high on warmth and low on competence (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske et al., 1999; Heckhausen et al., 1989; Kite, Deaux, & Miele, 1991; also see Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, this issue, and Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, this issue). In Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu's (1999, 2002) research on stereotype content, American respondents rated rosters of 24 social groups (e.g., Asians, disabled people, homeless people) on lists of traits reflecting warmth (e.g., friendly, good-natured, sincere, warm) and competence (e.g., capable, competent, intelligent, skillful). Consistently, the group "elderly people" wound up next to disabled and retarded people in the high warmth, low competence cluster. Competence ratings for elderly people ($M = 2.63$ of 5) fell below 78% of the other groups, differing significantly from the overall competence mean ($M = 3.10$). On the other hand, on perceived warmth, elderly people ($M = 3.78$ of 5) landed above 96% of the other groups, also differing significantly from the overall warmth mean ($M = 3.18$). Moreover, these two scores differed significantly from each other in all samples (Fiske et al., 1999; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) thus demonstrating the stability of this mixed stereotype. Consistent with the SCM's predictions that warmth and competence stereotypes are rooted in perceived lack of competitiveness and perceived status, respectively, elderly people were rated as less competitive ($M = 2.50$ of 5) than 65% of the other groups and lower on status ($M = 2.43$ of 5) than 78% of the other groups.

Other researchers have found, also, that elderly people are viewed as possessing far fewer competence traits than warmth traits. Compared to younger people, elderly people have been rated as warmer and friendlier, but also as less ambitious, less responsible (Andreoletti, Maurice, & Whalen, 2001), and less intellectually competent (Rubin & Brown, 1975). When Kite, Deaux, and Miele (1991) asked people for their perceptions of young and old women and men, they found that age stereotypes trumped gender stereotypes, and that regardless of gender, older people were rated as more feminine and less masculine than younger people. People are more likely to attribute memory failures of older adults to intellectual incompetence, and memory failures of younger adults to lack of attention or effort (Erber, Ethert, & Szuchman, 1992; Erber & Prager, 1999; Erber, Prager, Williams, & Caiola, 1996; Erber, Rothberg, Szuchman, & Ethert, 1993; Erber, Szuchman, & Ethert, 1993). In a study of perceptions of life span development, participants predicted that competence-related traits (independent, industrious,

intelligent, productive, self-confident, and smart) were likely to be lost about nine years earlier (age 72.3) than warmth-related traits (affectionate, friendly, good-natured, kind, and trustworthy; age 81.3), a significant difference (Heckhausen et al., 1989). Finally, several studies have uncovered the elderly incompetence stereotype in the workplace, where older employees are believed to be less effective than younger employees in various job-related tasks (Avolio & Barrett, 1987; Rosen & Jerdee, 1976a, 1976b; Singer, 1986). In fact, however, several studies have shown that older employees are at least as, and sometimes more, competent than younger employees in their jobs (for a review, see McCann & Giles, 2002).

Warmth and Competence Stereotypes Predict Emotional Prejudices

Just as out-group stereotypes are more complex than generalized negative beliefs, emotional prejudice involves more than plain contempt. Each combination of stereotypes carries with it at least one of four intergroup emotions—envy, pity, admiration, and contempt.

Envious prejudice is directed at high status, competitive groups that are viewed as threateningly capable and untrustworthy—those in the high competence, low warmth cluster (Eckes, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Envy tends to go to people who have superior, coveted positions that are viewed as illegitimate (Parrott & Smith, 1993); it involves feelings of inferiority (Smith, Parrott, Ozer, & Moniz, 1994) and tends to be directed upward (Smith, 2000). Historically, the competence imparted to members of this invidious category has been portrayed as guileful, thus making these groups potentially dangerous competitors (Glick & Fiske, 2001). The belief that members of these groups are intelligent but scheming legitimates prejudice and discrimination against them in the name of self-defense (Glick, 2002).

Low status, non-competitive groups viewed as warm and incompetent elicit pity (Eckes, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Pity tends to be directed downward (Smith, 2000) at people with stigmas (e.g., physical disability) for which they are not responsible (Weiner, Graham, & Chandler, 1982). For example, when AIDS, poverty, and obesity are described as onset uncontrollable (e.g., respectively from blood transfusion, natural disaster, and heredity) they elicit pity (Dijker, Kok, & Koomen, 1996; Rush, 1998; Zucker & Weiner, 1993); when the same stigmas are portrayed as onset controllable (e.g., respectively from drug use, gambling, and overeating), pity diminishes.

Admiration and contempt go to groups in the two evaluatively-consistent clusters respectively: the high warmth, high competence and low warmth, low competence, combinations. Admiration and pride are expressed toward ingroups and dominant social reference groups, whose positive outcomes reflect on (but do not detract from) the self (Tesser, 1988). These groups are perceived as having high status (a positive outcome) that is viewed as legitimate (i.e., earned through

competence and hard work). Contempt is directed primarily at groups that are stereotyped as low on both competence and warmth. These groups are perceived as having negative stigmas for which they are responsible (Weiner et al., 1982; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). For example, poverty and unemployment attributed to chronic gambling (Weiner et al., 1982) and homelessness attributed to drug addiction (Barnett, Quackenbush, & Pierce, 1997) elicit contempt.

Prejudice Toward Elderly People: Pitied and Sometimes Admired

As predicted, in our SCM research, college students endorsed pity as the emotion they were mostly likely to feel toward older people (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). The group “elderly people” elicited more pity ($M = 3.23$ of 5) than 79% of the other groups. Also, participants endorsed admiration ($M = 2.68$ of 5) as an emotion they feel toward elderly people, but expressed virtually no contempt or envy toward them. Pity is the main emotion uniquely directed to this group.

Pity may look benign on its surface, but it can create a dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy. Practitioners have discovered that the linguistic expression of pity and sympathy by doctors and other geriatric specialists conveys the idea that elderly people are helpless. Some older people internalize this message, and this can decrease their independence (Cohen, 1990). Indeed, Langer and Benevento (1978) found that the assignment of labels that convey inferiority (e.g., pitiful) actually renders people helpless and creates self-induced dependence (see Nussbaum, Pitts, Huber, Krieger, & Ohs, this issue).

We were not entirely surprised that participants in the Fiske et al. (2002) study also endorsed some admiration, a more positive emotion, toward elderly people (as well as toward in-groups). As reviewed earlier, admiration usually goes to cooperative groups with positive, controllable outcomes that reflect on the self. According to our data, elderly people are indeed viewed as a cooperative group. While the global category “elderly people” generally is not believed to have positive outcomes according to a traditional definition involving economic and professional success, they might be viewed as “survivors,” implying a subjectively positive, controllable outcome that reflects the Protestant work ethic, a deeply-ingrained American value.

The Elderly Stereotype is Pervasive: Cross-Cultural Evidence

The majority of the research reviewed above has focused on elderly stereotypes in the United States. However, there is some reason to believe that ageism is a uniquely Western problem and that other cultures accord the elderly respect and veneration. Collectivist cultures (e.g., East Asia) view the self as embedded in the group (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), place greater emphasis on achieving

group goals (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, Lucca, et al., 1988), and guide their social behavior by norms and duties (Triandis et al., 1988). On the other hand, individualist cultures (e.g., Western Europe, United States) view the self as autonomous (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), place greater emphasis on achieving individual goals (Triandis et al., 1988), and guide their social behavior by personal attitudes (Kashima, Siegel, Tanaka, & Kashima, 1992). Moreover, the value of filial piety, or respect for elders, is deeply rooted in the Confucian teachings that have helped to shape East Asian cultures (Sung, 2001).

Recently, we collected data that repudiate the assumption that Westerners stand alone in their perception of elderly people as sweet and feeble. As part of a large-scale international SCM study, college students in Belgium, Costa Rica, Hong Kong, Japan, Israel (one Jewish sample and one Arabic sample), and South Korea rated elderly people and other groups on items measuring warmth and competence, status and competition (for detail about the full data set, its methods, and results, see Cuddy, Fiske, Kwan, et al., 2004). In all samples, participants viewed elderly people as significantly more warm ($M = 3.49$ of 5) than competent ($M = 2.53$ of 5), aggregate $t(6) = 8.14$, $p < .001$. Most interestingly, in our three most collectivist samples—Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea—this pattern held up, warmth $M = 3.51$, and competence $M = 2.54$, differing significantly from each other in all samples, aggregate $t(2) = 10.97$, $p < .01$. In all samples, elderly warmth scores were significantly higher than the respective overall warmth means and significantly lower than the respective overall competence means, all $ps < .01$. As expected, elderly people were viewed as having low status ($M = 2.36$) and as non-competitive ($M = 2.33$).

We are not alone in our discovery of pan-cultural ageism. Harwood and colleagues (1996) surveyed participants in six nations, asking people to identify traits they associate with elderly people. Factor analysis uncovered two main dimensions—personal vitality (competence) and benevolence (warmth). Across samples, elderly people were rated as significantly higher on benevolence than on personal vitality. Moreover, the authors were surprised to find that East Asian participants, particularly Hong Kong residents, reported generally negative evaluations of elderly people. In other cross-cultural investigations, participants in China (Tien-Hyatt, 1986-1987), Japan (Koyano, 1989), Taiwan (Tien-Hyatt, 1986-1987), and Thailand (Sharps, Price Sharps, & Hanson, 1998) reported even more negative attitudes toward older people than their American counterparts. In short, there is mounting evidence that ageism is pan-cultural.

What is behind this apparent shift in attitudes toward older people? Presumably, modernization is to blame (Eyetsmitan, Gire, Khaleefa, & Satiardama, 2003; Nelson, this issue; Williams et al., 1997). Many of these non-Western cultures have recently undergone social structural changes that decrease both the status and the competitiveness—predictors of competence and warmth stereotypes—of older people. Branco and Williamson (1982) explain how transformations from

traditional, agrarian societies to modern, industrial societies lower the status of older people, through four mechanisms. First, medical progress increases the size of the elderly population, which institutionalizes retirement, which removes older people from prestigious positions. Second, technological skill eclipses experience as technological advances create new jobs, which also puts older people out of work. Third, young people become more transient, losing ties with older relatives (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, this issue). Fourth, increasing literacy renders oral traditions obsolete, eliminating the elders' position as sage. These changes in status are linked to the elimination of older people from competitive social roles. In sum, social changes decreased the status and competitiveness of older people, thus creating the warm, incompetent elderly stereotype.

The Elderly Stereotype is Persistent: The Current Study

Having illustrated the pervasiveness of the elderly stereotype, we now turn to demonstrating the persistence of this evaluatively-mixed stereotype. Given the widespread consensual stereotype of elderly people as warm and incompetent, this stereotype will likely resist change. Hence, exploring factors that might promote change, against all odds, is an essential next step. In this study, we present elderly targets that vary on demonstrated competence and assess their perceived warmth and competence. Possibly, elderly people who disconfirm stereotypes of their incompetence (e.g., Gray Panthers) may be denigrated on warmth. This design allows us to explore how different levels of stereotype-consistent behavior might impact not only ratings of competence, but also ratings on the other key dimension, warmth. We might expect a competent elderly person to be seen as less warm than a reassuringly incompetent elderly person. The open question is whether this predicted loss of warmth is offset by increases in perceived competence, or whether efforts to gain competence may backfire, decreasing rated warmth without corresponding benefits in competence.

Participants and Materials

Participants were Princeton University undergraduates ($N = 55$) who completed the questionnaire as part of a larger unrelated packet. All participants read the following information about an elderly target:

George is a 71-year-old retired plumber, currently living in upstate New York. He found it difficult to retire at first, but has since settled nicely into retirement, playing golf at least once a week and keeping himself busy with his grandchildren, who live in a neighboring town. He and his wife Margaret have always enjoyed taking long walks, and both are early risers.

This information by itself constituted the control condition. The two experimental conditions included additional information that varied the target's level of

competence. In the *high-incompetence* condition, participants read: “George has recently begun experiencing some memory problems—last week he spent a half hour looking for his keys, and eventually his wife had to remind him exactly where he’d left them.”

Participants in the *low-incompetence* condition read: “George prides himself on his perfect memory—though last week he spent a half hour looking for his keys, he eventually remembered exactly where he’d left them.”

Participants then indicated how much George possessed each of a series of personality traits, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very*). We included one manipulation check (*competence*) and three items designed to assess warmth (*warm*, *friendly*, and *good-natured*).

Results

We created a composite score of warmth by averaging the three warmth items, $\alpha = .81$. A one-way ANOVA revealed the predicted main effect on this score, $F(2, 52) = 3.93$, $p < .03$, such that participants rated the high-incompetence elderly person as warmer ($M = 7.47$, $SD = .73$) than the low-incompetence ($M = 6.85$, $SD = 1.28$) and control ($M = 6.59$, $SD = .87$) elderly targets. Paired comparisons supported these findings, that the high-incompetence elderly person was rated as warmer than both the low-incompetence and control elderly targets, $t(35) = 5.03$ and $t(34) = 11.14$, respectively, both $ps < .01$. In addition, reflecting the persistence of the stereotype of elderly people as incompetent, participants saw targets as equally (in)competent in all conditions, $F(2, 52) = 1.32$, *n.s.*

Discussion

Competence information affected the warmth stereotype, such that the elderly target in the high-incompetence condition was perceived to be warmer than the elderly targets in both the control and low-incompetence conditions. However, competence information did not affect competence ratings, as all three elderly targets were rated as equally (in)competent. Apparently, the negative aspect of the elderly stereotype (incompetence) resists change, while the positive aspect of the elderly stereotype (warmth) is more malleable. What’s more, elderly targets who behaved *more* incompetently *gained* in warmth, indicating that the highly incompetent target was rewarded on his group’s positive stereotype (warm) for behaving *consistently* with his group’s negative stereotype (competent). Rather than the stereotype swapping that one might have expected—warmth for competence—we discovered what might be termed an oppositional stereotype enhancement effect: When members of mixed-stereotype groups behaviorally confirm their negative stereotype (i.e., a member of a group stereotyped as warm and incompetent behaves incompetently), they enhance their positive stereotype without experiencing

a perceived loss on their negative stereotype. This finding resembles the rewards accorded to women by sexists: When the women behave incompetently, they are accorded paternalistic benevolent sexism, being valued on warmth dimensions, but when they behave competently, they receive hostile sexism, being devalued on warmth dimensions (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001; Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997).

The lack of differences among the competence ratings could conceivably reflect a failure of our competence manipulation. However, in a related study, not presented here, we used a different, clearly face-valid competence manipulation and found the same null effect on competence ratings (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2004). Thus, we believe our competence manipulation was internally valid. Nevertheless, the parallel to sexism is supportive. As always, additional studies are in order and should manipulate warmth and competence of other groups with evaluatively-mixed stereotypes, including those from the competent, cold cluster. We would expect to find that behavioral consistency on the negative part of a group's stereotype (e.g., incompetence for elderly people, and coldness for Asian Americans) leads to enhancement on the positive part of the group's stereotype (e.g., warmth and competence, respectively).

In the current study, when the elderly target behaved conspicuously consistently with the negative stereotype—incompetence—people reported enhanced ratings on the positive stereotype—warmth. Tiedens and her colleagues (Tiedens, 2000, 2001a, 2001b; Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Mesquita, 2000) have uncovered a similar effect for members of groups that might occupy the competent, cold cluster (e.g., rich people, career women, Black professionals). They find that status (related to competence) is awarded to people who display anger (related to warmth) compared to people who display sadness. In one study (Tiedens, 2001a, Study 1), participants who viewed edited tapes of President Clinton expressing anger over the Monica Lewinsky scandal supported him more than participants who viewed him express sadness over the scandal (although they reported a desire to see him express the latter). In other studies, peers granted higher status to co-workers who expressed anger compared to co-workers who expressed sadness, and assigned a higher status position and a higher salary to job candidates who described themselves as angry versus sad (Tiedens, 2001a). In other words, when members of competent, cold groups behaviorally confirm their negative stereotype (cold) they enhance their positive stereotype (competent).

What might cause this increased liking of group members who confirm stereotypes about themselves? In part, the effect may be due to system justification motives (Jost & Banaji, 1994). As individuals seek to maintain a belief that the social structures to which they belong are just and fair, members of groups that confirm worldviews may be particularly welcome, and thus particularly liked (Glick & Fiske, 2001). In part, too, people have a general need to feel that the world is an orderly, predictable place (Fiske, 2004; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993). Events that

confirm our expectations serve this purpose. Indeed, the fact that we shape events to confirm our expectations reflects the robustness of this need (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). In addition to this general need to predict events, humans have, also, a specific social cognitive need to predict the behavior of those in their environment. One means of accomplishing this goal is to estimate the behavior of others based on beliefs about members of that person's group, using group-level stereotypes to predict behavior at the level of the individual group member. Indeed, people have been shown both to expect certain behaviors from members of different social groups (Darley & Gross, 1983) and to ensure that the behavior of these individuals matches their stereotype-based expectations by eliciting this behavior from group members (Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). Of course, the ability to shape the behavior of others to meet our needs for predictably is likely to be bounded by reality to some extent, making this a potentially problematic route to confirming predictions. This strong desire to predict the behavior of others, coupled with our use of stereotypes to do so, might mean that witnessing behavior confirming our stereotypes—and thus revealing us to be accurate prognosticators—would lead us to experience positive affect, which could then translate to increased liking for those who confirm predictions. Thus when an elderly man fumbles with a computer—confirming expectations of incompetence—he may be perceived as even warmer than the average elderly person, but not as less competent than the average elderly person.

When do groups swap warmth for competence, or vice versa? While the hypothetical study about a fictitious elderly target that we reported above dealt with the varying degrees to which an individual group member's behaviors confirmed stereotypes, the SCM deals more broadly with the social structural positions of groups. According to the SCM, social structure predicts how groups are sorted in the stereotypes map: High status groups are seen as competent, and competitive groups are seen as lacking warmth. When a group experiences a change in perceived status or in perceived competitiveness, a substantial change in their location on the map should follow. The rare groups that are perceived as high in competence and high in warmth are non-stigmatized, majority groups, who have few worries.

For groups that are perceived negatively on at least one dimension, however, efforts to increase standing on that dimension can have ripple effects on that group's placement in the stereotypes map. Groups that traditionally have been seen as warm and incompetent (e.g., Black Americans, elderly people, women) might be particularly attuned to changing perceptions of their competence, by demanding recognition as equally intelligent and capable as their majority group counterparts. Indeed, some groups stereotyped as warm and incompetent have devoted a great deal of effort to increase their status in recent decades. Women and Black Americans in the United States, for example, became politically active in demanding equal rights in employment and other domains in the Civil Rights

movements of the 1950s through the 1970s (see, e.g., Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996; Lawson, 1991). Interestingly, however, while these groups have gained in rights and recognition, they have foregone some of the positive impressions of their warmth. Early investigations of stereotypes of Black Americans (e.g., Katz & Braly, 1933) depicted that group as lazy but fun-loving (incompetent but warm). As they became more of a political force (and thus more competent), stereotypes changed to include colder, more negative interpersonal traits such as hostile (e.g., Devine, 1989). Similarly, career women (high status, competitive) are viewed as significantly less warm, but also more competent, than stay-at-home mothers (low status, non-competitive). However, when career women become working mothers, thus lowering their perceived status and competitiveness, their warmth stereotype increases while their competence stereotype decreases (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004b). Thus it appears as though gains on one dimension can prove costly on the other dimension.

Elderly people have emerged as a political force to be reckoned with in recent years, with the politically active AARP boasting a membership of over 35 million (AARP, n.d.), and Social Security and Medicare seen increasingly as untouchable by politicians—witness Al Gore’s October 3, 2000 promise in the first presidential debate in his 2000 presidential election campaign to put both programs in a “lock-box.” As such, the stereotype of elderly people as “doddering but dear” (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002) may be in flux. As the elderly increase in size and influence as a political force, it remains to be seen how this increase in status will impact the traditional view of the elderly as nurturing and feeble.

General Discussion

The elderly stereotype is widespread and resistant to change, and it is costly. The evaluatively-mixed nature of the elderly stereotype (warm and incompetent) leads to an evaluatively-mixed pattern of prejudice; people feel both pity and admiration toward elderly people. Moreover, contrary to lay beliefs, the elderly stereotype extends not only beyond the United States, but also beyond individualist cultures in general; evaluatively-mixed stereotypes of elderly people are pan-cultural. Finally, the study presented in this article suggests that it is difficult for an individual elderly person to override the warm and incompetent stereotype via stereotype-inconsistent behavior.

Discrimination Against Elderly People: Sometimes Helped, Sometimes Excluded

We have discussed the cognitive (stereotypes) and emotional (prejudice) components of ageism, but have not yet discussed the behavioral component—discrimination. Our continuing research on stereotype content suggests that evaluatively-mixed stereotypes pave the way to evaluatively-mixed patterns of intergroup

behaviors (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004a). Preliminary data from a representative U.S. sample tested predictions about the types of discrimination groups with evaluatively-mixed stereotypes are likely to endure (for detail about the full data set, its methods, and results, see Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004a). Perceived warmth correlated positively with helping, and perceived competence correlated negatively with social exclusion. Thus, groups viewed as warm and incompetent, such as elderly people, face two types of behaviors based on their group membership—they are helped, which is often positive, and they are excluded, which is always negative.

Help often derives from pity (Zucker & Weiner, 1993); thus, mainstream society often assists groups that are pitied—those seen as feeble and warm. Helping the old woman to cross the street is dyed-in-the-wool American ideology. Social programs such as Meals on Wheels exemplify this cultural value. Certainly, we all have witnessed the generosity displayed by community service, religious, and other organizations in helping ill, immobile, and lonely elderly residents.

Nevertheless, as depicted in Silverstein's children's poem (1981, p. 95), societies often disregard their older members. Examples of interpersonal and institutional neglect of elderly people abound (for an exhaustive review, see Pasupathi & Lockenhoff, 2002). For example, in medical settings, older patients are chronically disregarded. Medical ailments in older populations often are misdiagnosed or completely overlooked by physicians (Derby, 1991). Mental health professionals frequently fail to notice depression in older patients (Lasser, Siegel, Dukoff, & Sunderland, 1998) and are more likely to treat depressed older patients with drugs instead of psychotherapy (Gatz & Pearson, 1988). Perhaps the most insidious type of neglect of older patients has to do with physician-patient communication. For example, physicians avoid discussing end-of-life issues with older patients, presumably because of their own discomfort (Resnick, Cowart, & Kubrin, 1998). In an analysis of blind-coded, taped medical interviews, researchers found that when talking to patients over age 65, physicians were less engaged, less respectful, less supportive, and less egalitarian than when talking to younger patients. Most startlingly, physicians provided less-detailed medical information to older patients (Greene, Adelman, Charon, & Friedmann, 1989). Sadly, this is only a sampling of the findings that reveal the neglect suffered by elderly people in medical settings.

Older people often face the cold shoulder in workplace settings, through hiring practices and pressure to retire. Older people who want or need to work have trouble finding jobs and keeping jobs, often because of unfair and inaccurate assessments of their presumed or actual productivity (for a review, see McCann & Giles, 2002). Survey data indicate that a large number of unemployed older Americans would rather be working but are unable to find jobs (McCann & Giles, 2002). "Age 65" has become the magic number associated with retirement, and many older people who want to continue to work feel pressured to retire. As McCann and Giles (2002, p. 175) write, premature retirement leaves older people, especially those who strongly identify with work, "feeling isolated and confused."

Social exclusion hurts elderly people not only by limiting their access to vital emotional and physical resources; it also leads to innumerable negative health outcomes. For example, social exclusion causes people to engage in unintentionally self-defeating behaviors, such as irrational risk-taking, unhealthy behaviors, and excessive procrastination (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002). Social isolation predicts numerous health problems, such as re-hospitalization in older veterans (Mistry, Rosansky, McGuire, McDermott, & Jarvik, 2001), morbidity and mortality from cancer and cardiovascular disease (Hawkey, Burleson, Berntson, & Cacioppo, 2003; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2003), and myriad adverse mental health consequences (Perodeau & du Fort, 2000; Uchinc, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Moreover, excluding older people precludes the kind of intergenerational contact that could curtail ageist thinking and behavior (see Hagestad & Uhlenberg, this issue).

Concluding Comments

While noticing someone's age is not inherently offensive, acting on age-based stereotypes clearly is; sadly, prejudice against older people often goes unchallenged by mainstream society. Nevertheless, certain avenues may decrease ageist beliefs and behaviors. High-quality intergenerational contact (Caspi, 1984; Schwartz & Simmons, 2001) and exposure to stereotype-inconsistent (Jackson & Sullivan, 1988) and individuating (Eerber et al., 1992) information could help to undo the elderly stereotype by restoring a sense of esteem for older people. At the intergroup level, reversal of the elderly incompetence stereotype might follow from a visible reinstatement of elderly people to high-status social positions.

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