Aging Stereotypes—Internalization or Inoculation? A Commentary
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I was 7 years old when I can first remember my “Bubbie” getting ready for bed during an overnight visit. With some curiosity, I watched her put her teeth into a glass of water and noticed the sagging flesh on her upper arms as she donned her nightgown, and I knew, without being told, that these physical peculiarities were associated with age. At that moment, I resolved to take good care of my teeth, and later, when I knew something about fitness, I exercised my triceps to prevent the sagging flesh. These reactions to my beliefs about the physical effects of aging are probably not an anomaly. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that aging individuals are more resistant to the internalization of beliefs about aging than they are given credit for in Levy’s (2003) description of the development of aging self-stereotypes.

Perhaps the most important factor fostering resistance to the internalization of aging stereotypes is a tendency for aging adults to deny their membership in the category “elderly.” Older adults report feeling younger than their chronological age, and they perceive their own developmental goals to be more consistent with the goals of adults younger than themselves (Heckhausen, 1997; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). Older adults also resist the category label “elderly,” preferring to call themselves “senior citizens,” “retired persons,” or “mature adults” (Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Ward, 1984). These explicit effects on self-categorization are mirrored by implicit measures of age identity that show that older individuals identify with the category “young” as strongly as do young individuals (Levy and Banaji, 2002). In essence, many older adults do not identify with the stigmatized group, an achievement that is quite feasible given the blurry demarcation of age group membership. Although Levy (2003) suggests that the ingroup preference does not apply among the old, the fact is that older adults may define their ingroup differently from the category into which younger adults place them.

Aging adults’ eschewal of the category elderly may be related to individuating processes in impression formation (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1989). Research has shown that people are less likely to attribute category stereotypes to others when they have information about their unique attributes or when they are motivated to seek such information, an effect that has been documented in judgments of aging adults (e.g., Fiske, Neuberg, Beattie, & Milberg, 1987; Kite & Johnson, 1988; Neuberg & Fiske, 1987). Judgments about the self are made with abundant individuating information and high motivation that should work against the application of category stereotypes. Indeed, it may be far easier for people to resist internalizing aging stereotypes than racial or gender stereotypes, inasmuch as they can draw on a lifetime of individuating information that contradicts aging stereotypes. Moreover, because aging adults do not identify with the category elderly, the negative attitudes that young children express toward getting older (cf. Montepare & Zebrowitz, 2002) may ultimately be applied to themselves more rarely than Levy (2003) expects. A life-long belief that aging stereotypes apply only to others argues against Levy’s hypothesis that uncritical acceptance of age stereotypes when they are initially encountered later produces strong effects on the self.

The relatively youthful self-perceptions of many aging adults may inoculate them against behavioral confirmation of aging stereotypes. Indeed, people who are aware that negative stereotypes may be applied to them often compensate rather than capitulate, and self-fulfilling prophecies are not so readily obtained as some have assumed (cf. Snyder, 1992). As illustrated in the anecdote about my reactions to my aging Bubbie, people may take actions to ward off undesirable possible selves (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Behavioral confirmation of aging stereotypes also may fail to occur (a) because people engage in self-verification, behaving in a manner that provides corrective feedback to others with erroneous trait expectations (e.g., Swann & Ely, 1984); (b) because people show compensatory behavior that is opposite to disagreeable expectations (e.g., Miller & Myers, 1998; Zebrowitz, Andreotti, Collins, Lee, & Blumenthal, 1998); or even (c) because those holding the stereotypes show compensatory behavior, behaving in ways that elicit behaviors opposite to those they expect (e.g., Bond, 1972).

If aging adults do not identify with the category elderly and are inoculated against internalizing aging stereotypes, then how can researchers account for the negative effects of these stereotypes on older adults’ cognitive and physical functioning that Levy (2003) has documented? For one thing, the behavioral effects of stereotype activation do not require self-stereotyping. Indeed, activating elderly stereotypes can also affect the behavior of young individuals (e.g., Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Dijksterhuis, Aarts, Bargh, & Van Knippenberg, 2000; see Wheeler & Petty, 2001, for a review of the behavioral effects of activating other- and self-stereotypes). Although Levy (2003) reports effects of elderly stereotype activation on older but not younger adults, this need not be attributed to differential internalization of elderly stereotypes. Indeed, there are other variables that can moderate the effects of stereotype activation manipulations. Greater “age-schematicity” in older adults (Montepare & Clements, 2001) may increase their susceptibility to the activation of elderly stereotypes without necessarily implying greater internalization. “Stereotype-threat” may make older adults more behaviorally responsive to the activation of elderly stereotypes even if they do not internalize them (cf. Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Since “cognitive load” may facilitate the application of an activated stereotype (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991), older adults may show a greater effect of any stereotype activation if their cognitive load is higher when performing various experimental tasks. Similarly, weakened “inhibitory processes” in older adults may contribute to greater behavioral effects of activated stereotypes (von Hippel, Silver, & Lynch, 2000). To determine why the activation of aging stereotypes has a greater effect on the behavior of older than younger adults will require additional research to identify the underlying mechanism, which may include one or more of the possibilities discussed above. Such research should include a comparison of older and younger adults’ behavioral responses to the activation of stereotypes other than elderly ones. Without such research it is premature to attribute effects of primed age.
stereotypes on older but not younger adults to the internalization of aging stereotypes by elderly but not young participants.

In sum, there is good reason to believe that older adults are able to resist internalizing aging stereotypes because of the inculcating effects of not identifying with the category “elderly,” individuating information about the self, and compensatory behaviors that stave off self-fulfilling prophecy effects. However, this should not be taken as a dismissal of the adverse effects of such stereotypes. Even if age stereotypes do not give rise to widespread internalization, they nevertheless are to be deplored for the negative behavioral effects that their activation may have on people of any age and for the prejudice and discrimination against older adults that they engender. But, let us be cautious about viewing adults as haplessly assimilating age stereotypes into their self-concepts.

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Conscious Versus Unconscious Levels of Aging Self-Stereotypes: Author’s Reply

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The comments by Hummert (2003) and Zebrowitz (2003) on “Mind matters: Cognitive and physical effects of aging self-stereotypes” (Levy, 2003) are greatly appreciated. They raise several points that are important for their own sake and also provide me an opportunity to clarify some aspects of the article.

Hummert (2003) insightfully suggests that by using the distinction between “stereotypes as cognitive structures and stereotyping as the process of applying stereotypes,” it is easier to think about how aging stereotypes could become aging self-stereotypes and how aging self-stereotypes could be applied to others in one’s group, in contrast to oneself. The latter distinction could also take into account the operation of stereotyping on both unconscious and conscious levels; for, individuals may consciously repudiate their old-age identity while unconsciously maintaining it. This dichotomy provides another way of interpreting a study, cited by Hummert (2003), that showed elders perceive their cohort to be more debilitated

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