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A Content Analysis of the Advertisements in Three Nursing Journals: What are They Saying About the Aged?

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A Content Analysis
of the
Advertisements in Three Nursing Journals:
What are They Saying About the Aged?

"He's nothing but a dirty old man and an old codger!"
"You old fuddy-duddy."
"She acts like she's in her second childhood."
"What a cute little old lady" or "What a sweet little old man."
"Young is beautiful!"
and so on...

How many times have we said, thought, or heard any or all of the above phrases? The answer is probably more times than we'd care to count. Words spoken carelessly, without thought... yet how clear a picture they show of how we feel about the aged in our society. Robert Butler, an eminent gerontologist, has a word for phrases such as the above, and the attitudes and feelings that are reflected in them: ageism. Ageism, according to Butler, is a process that's similar to racism but with an added twist: the ageist will some day become that which he now jeers.¹

Ageism is not a new phenomenon. Aristotle himself wrote of the wonders and beauty of youth and stated his belief that after the age of fifty, man definitely 'declined.'² But never before has the emphasis on youth been so profound in our society. Youth is associated with worth, value and productivity; the aged individual is seen as having little to contribute to our fast-moving, technologically-exploding society.³

The literature abounds with examples of research that explore views people of different age groups, occupational groups, and social groups have toward the aged. McTavish, in an extensive study of such research, stated that the

results of many of these

"include views that old tired, not sexually interested, mentally slower, forgetful and less able to learn new things, grouchy, withdrawn, feeling sorry for themselves, less likely to participate in activities (except, perhaps, religion), isolated, in the least happy or fortunate time of life, and unproductive and defensive in various combinations,"⁴

Gresham gives examples of how we have 'infantilized' and patronized the elderly, and notes how this is a "socialization process whereby the aged are socialized and cast into the role of children."⁵ In his research, Martel found that the role of the aged has become increasingly ambiguous.⁶ Thorsen, et. al., found that "younger and better educated subjects have a more positive attitude toward the aged, while older subjects, and those with fewer years education showed a more negative response."⁷ Seefeedt, et. al., discovered that grade school children gave negative responses when shown a picture of an elderly man and "asked how they would feel when they were old."⁸ Palmore showed that college students and faculty have several misconceptions about the aged, among them being:

1. "A large portion of the aged live in institutions."
2. "Over 15% of the population are over 65."
3. "The majority of aged are frequently bored."⁹

Studies of how older individuals view themselves show varying results, but more than one points to the fact that the aged tend to have a negative self-image. In fact, Peters notes that

"a significant number of old persons tend to deny that they are old, to disassociate themselves from

the category of the aged, and to identify themselves as considerably younger than they are, in fact, chronologically."10

In his review of the literature about the aged's attitudes towards themselves, Robin found that persons in the age group of 61 to 70 were more likely to rate their own intelligence as "lower than others" than any other age group, and the greatest agreement with the statement "old persons are annoying" came from those individuals aged 60 to 69 years.¹¹ These findings, along with the ambiguity of the aged role, seem to suggest that the aged population in our society are 'getting the message' of how the rest of us feel about them. As Tuckman and Lorge state, the aged are "living in a social climate which is not conducive to feelings of adequacy, usefulness, and security."¹²

The profession of nursing, as well as other health professions, has also tended to assign undesirable characteristics to the aged person, and view him as somehow different from the rest of the population. DeLora and Moses discovered that very few baccalaureate nursing students desired to work in a gerontological nursing setting upon graduation.¹³ In commenting upon the health professions and priority of care, Palmore found upon reviewing twelve studies that

"most medical students and doctors, nursing students and nurses, occupational therapy students, psychiatric clinic personnel, and social workers tend to believe the negative stereotypes about the aged and prefer to work with children or younger adults."¹⁴

Campbell's research has interesting findings; she discovered that

"although the registered nurses had the most extensive education and were the least willing to accept stereotyped statements, they spent the least time caring for old people and preferred not to work with them."¹⁵

One way in which ageistic attitudes are manifested is through mass media. Advertisements are an example of this media. This researcher, then, was confronted with the following question: What are our most widely circulated nursing journals saying about the aged? Ageistic attitudes and stereotypes would surely not be reflected in the journal articles themselves (although the sparseness of articles concerning the aging client might be an area for future study!). But what of the advertisements in these journals; might they be communicating something about the aged to their readers? Dexter and White, when stating examples of literature of mass communication (mass communication being defined as "an effective reinforcer and stabilizer of beliefs") state that

"the greater part of some specialized medical journal is obviously designed for experts, but some of its editorials (AND SOME OF ITS ADVERTISEMENTS, TOO) may have the characteristics of what we call mass communication."¹⁶ (Capitals mine.)

In order to effectively analyze the advertisements of our most widely read nursing journals, this researcher decided on content analysis as her method. The technique of content analysis has been widely used in research concerning the

aged, and the following are significant examples. Seltzer and Atchley studied children's books published from 1870 to 1960 to determine "the means by which children learn their concepts about the old, and of the changes that may have occurred on the concepts being presented through these means."¹⁷ Hickey, et. al., analyzed 208 essays of third graders to discover their perceptions about the elderly.¹⁸ Northcott studied prime time television dramas to discover how the aged see themselves represented on television.¹⁹ Harris and Feinberg analyzed both daytime dramas and commercials to determine what these were saying about our elderly population.²⁰ Peterson and Karnes, in an analysis of 53 Newberry Award Winning books for adolescents, found that although overt stereotyping was not apparent, "older people were portrayed only as shadows who moved in and out of the major flow of the story at expeditious times."²¹ Important to my research is Smith's analysis of 'prescription drug advertising' (in two medical journals) to determine how the elderly were portrayed. He found that

"while both the elderly and nonelderly patients are portrayed in a generally negative fashion, advertisements tended to reinforce the stereotypes of the elderly in this negative portrayal."²²

In summary, the technique of content analysis is useful

"for describing in a systematic way the content of communications"; it is objective "in that each step is made explicit, systematic because material is consistently included or excluded on the basis of rules, and general because the findings should broader theoretical relevance."²³

The three nursing journals chosen for this research

project were the 1977 volumes of Nursing '77, the American Journal of Nursing, and Nursing Outlook. These three nursing journals are among the most widely read by registered nurses. Three months (January, July, and December of the 1977 issues) were arbitrarily chosen. Advertisements to be used were limited to those greater than or equal to one-half the size of a journal page.

The advertisements were evaluated in terms of four areas:

1. Percentage of advertisements with an aged person pictured, and percentage of ads of product advertisement with reference to the aged person through words and/or pictures.
2. Age distribution of nurses and age distribution of patients pictured.
3. Environment of advertisements with elderly patients pictured as compared to nonelderly patients.
4. Physical appearance and activity of the elderly patients as compared to other patients.

In the area of Age Distribution, the following categories of age ranges were used: 0 to 20 years, 20 to 30 years, 30 to 45 years, 45 to 65 years, and 65 years and older. Decision as to age was based on the following criteria: facial characteristics, hair style and color, figure and general overall impression. A similar design was used by Harris and Feinberg in the study mentioned previously; in addition to the above characteristics, these two authors used vocal timbre and body movements to categorize individuals as to age. These were not applicable to my study.

Concerning the environments of the advertisements with patients pictured, the ads were evaluated in terms of the

patients' level of independence. A positive portrayal was shown if the patient was pictured at home, in a doctor's office or clinic. A negative portrayal would be shown if the patient was pictured in the hospital bedroom.

Physical appearance and level of activity of the patients pictured was evaluated in the following way. The patient was portrayed in a positive manner if two or more of the following characteristics were present: in his/her own clothes, out of bed, positive or neutral facial expression, absence of supportive equipment. A negative attitude was conveyed if the patient was wearing a hospital gown or had an 'untidy appearance', if he was in bed, if he had a negative facial expression, or if supportive equipment was present. Positive facial expressions would include smiling or obvious interest. A neutral facial expression would be portrayed if the patient was conscious or asleep. Negative facial expressions would include grimaces or other signs of pain, or fear. Supportive equipment includes intravenous therapy, oxygen therapy, nasogastric tubes, respirators, monitors, wheelchairs and the like. In the previously cited study, Smith used level of activity to evaluate whether elderly patients were portrayed in a positive or negative manner.

If the product advertisement pictured an aging individual, the ad was evaluated as stated in the above paragraph. Product advertisements were also seen to portray the elderly in a negative way if the words used associated the aged individual with illness (physical or mental) at the exclusion of

other groups of patients, showed other age groups and excluded the aged individual, or used words that attributed undesirable characteristics to the aged individual. Undesirable characteristics are those referring to dependence and inability to care for oneself.

Five hypotheses were initially made by this researcher.

They are:

1. There will be few nurses in the age ranges above 45 years.
2. There will be few aged patients pictured.
3. Those product advertisements with pictures or words with reference to the aged will portray the aged as being unable to care for themselves independently.
4. Aged patients will be more likely to be pictured in the hospital than patients in the other age ranges.
5. Aging patients will be more likely to be portrayed as being unable to care for themselves independently than patients in other age ranges.

RESULTS

A total of 253 advertisements were obtained. This researcher included each advertisement only once, and excluded second, third, etc. appearances. The ads tended to fall into two broad areas: hospital employment opportunities, and product advertisements. A total of 130 nurses were identified. Age distribution of the nurses as portrayed in the advertisements clearly supported my first hypothesis at a level of significance beyond .001, and the results are as follows:

Age	Number	% of Total
20-30	107	82%
30-45	8	6%
45-65	3	2%
65+ over	0	0%
Not classifiable	12	9%
Total	130	100%

What do these results unrealistically convey? That only 2% of nurses ages 45 to 65 and 0% of nurses age 65 and over practice nursing!

Age distribution of patients as portrayed in the advertisements are as follows:

Age	Number	% of Total
0-20	22	50%
20-30	7	16%
30-45	3	6%
45-65	1	2%
65 + over	5	11%
Not classifiable	7	16%
Totals	45	100%

My findings are significant to a level beyond .001. Although only 5 patients over 65 were shown, this proved to be 11%, or the third highest category. A clearly distorted view of 50% of patients in the 0 to 20 range was obtained. Only 3 patients in the age range of 30 to 45 and one patient in the age range 45 to 65 were pictured, which is also a highly unrealistic view of the situation as it truly exists.

Of the 131 product advertisements, aged individuals were specifically mentioned in only two. The first ad pictured an enema solution, one use being for "geriatric constipation." No other specific age group was mentioned. The second ad showed a liquid diet for patients whose diets needed supplementing. Pictured was an elderly man leaving the hospital in a wheelchair. A third advertisement indirectly

referred to older nurses; a professional shoe company stated their product was only for "Young Women in White," thereby excluding a large portion of the nurses who are nursing! Another omission of the elderly, this time as patients, was shown in the many advertisements for books pertaining to medical or nursing care; only one book included the aging patient. Its title: Rehabilitation: A Manual of Care for the Disabled and the Elderly. The above findings tend to support the prevailing beliefs that the elderly are: 1. not seen as important; and 2. pictured as dependent and unable to care for themselves.

My findings in relation to the environments of patients were similar to Smith's results. Patients in all age groups tended to be portrayed in a negative manner; i. e., in a hospital bedroom:

Ages	Hospital Bedroom	Hospital Playroom	Doctor's or Nurse's Office	Home	Undetermined
0-20	12	2	3		5
20-30	4				3
30-45	1				2
45-65	1				
65+over	4			1	
TOTALS	22	2	3	1	10

Of interest is the finding that only patients in the age ranges 0 to 20 and 65 and over were portrayed in areas other than the hospital bedroom. Therefore, my hypothesis that geriatric clients would

hospital bedroom than patients in other age groups is not supported by the above findings.

Physical appearance and activity of the patients in all age ranges with the exception of patients 30 to 45 tended to be generally negative, as shown below:

	0-20	20-30	30-45	45-65	65 + over
Patients with over-all positive activity + appearance	5	1	3	0	2
Patients with over-all negative activity + appearance	9	2	0	1	3

In this instance, there seemed to be no relation between age and general negative or positive overall appearance or activity. With few exceptions, patients in the overall positive category had one 'negative' characteristic. However, unlike other age groups, all patients in the age ranges 45 to 65 and 65 and over had supportive equipment of some kind, tending to reinforce the belief that aging clients are more likely to be pictured as dependent on others for their care.

Auster stresses that since content analysis is objective, "different coders should secure the same results when they apply the same set of categories to the same content."²⁵ This researcher secured the help of a different coder to test the reliability of the first three areas of her research: age distribution of patients, age distribution of nurses, and product advertisements.

The coder's results in the area of age distribution of nurses are as follows (This researcher's results are in parentheses.):

Age	Number	% of Total
20-30	92 (107)	75% (82%)
30-45	10 (8)	8% (10%)
45-65	2 (3)	1.6% (2%)
65 + over	0 (0)	0% (0%)
Not classifiable	20 (12)	15% (9%)
Total	124 (136)	100% 100%

Using the statistical test chi square to determine the level of significance, the findings again were shown to support the hypotheses to a level of significance beyond .001. Especially significant is the fact that the coder also found 0% of nurses 65 and over portrayed in the advertisements.

In the area of age distribution of patients, the results obtained by the coder also supported my second hypothesis to a level of significance beyond .001. The greatest difference in the results concern the age ranges 45 to 65, and 65 and over:

Age	Number		% of Total	
0-20	19	(22)	49%	(50%)
20-30	5	(7)	13%	(16%)
30-45	4	(3)	10%	(6%)
45-65	0	(1)	0%	(2%)
65 + over	4	(5)	10%	(11%)
Not classifiable	7	(7)	18%	(16%)
Totals	39	45	100%	(100%)

In the area of product advertisements, the coder cited the two ads concerning the enema solution and liquid dietary supplement. However, she did not note the lack of books concerning care of the aging client or the professional shoes advertisement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING

A basic concept integrated throughout each facet of the curricula of all nursing schools is the importance of perceiving one's client as an individual, not as a stereotyped patient. We in nursing need support in adhering to this goal so that we can provide creative, individualized care. Smith suggests that "it is possible for a professional to develop a negative 'set' about older patients even before seeing a particular aged patient."²⁴ I propose that the ageistic tendencies of the advertisements in our professional nursing journals, while by no means formulating our attitudes, pose another impediment in our striving for the above stated goal of individualized care. More research is definitely needed to determine the extent to which these advertisements do affect nurses' attitudes toward the aging patient.

SUMMARY

Using the technique of content analysis, this researcher evaluated advertisements in nine issues of three widely circulated nursing journals for perceptions about the aged. Two hundred and fifty-three advertisements were analyzed in four areas: age distribution of patients, age distribution of nurses, environments of patients pictured, and physical activity and appearance of patients pictured. The results showed ageistic advertising in terms of age distribution of patients and nurses. No relationship was found between the age of the patient and environment, physical appearance and activity. However, the research findings did show that aging patients tended to be pictured as dependent on others for assistance in performing daily activities.

APPENDIX A: DETERMINING THE LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE

I used the statistical test chi-square to determine the level of significance of my results (and my coder's results) in the area of age distribution of patients and age distribution of nurses. The following is an example of how I went about doing this. In this particular example, I am using the results of the age distribution of patients.

	COLUMN 1	COLUMN 2	COLUMN 3	COLUMN 4	COLUMN 5
Age	f_o	f_e	$f_o - f_e$	$(f_o - f_e)^2$	$(f_o - f_e)^2 / f_e$
0-20	50%	36.9%	13.1	171.61	4.65
20-30	16%	16.0%	0	256	16
30-45	6%	16.8%	-10.8	100.8	6
45-65	2%	20.5%	-18.5	41	2
65+over	11%	10.1%	.9	111.1	11
Not classifiable	16%	0%	—	—	—

The f_o refers to "observed frequency." The f_e refers to "expected frequency"; in this instance, I am using the breakdown by age groups of the American population as my f_e . Chi-square is obtained by adding together the numbers in column 5.

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